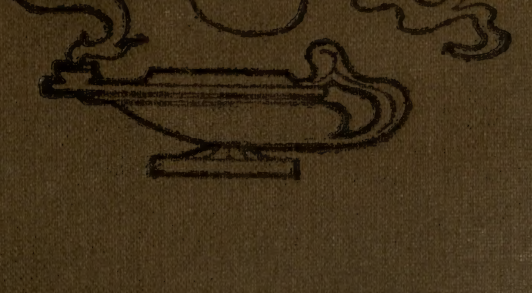
CHINESE FOLK-LORE



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Chinese Folk-Lore

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CHINESE FOLK-LORE

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BY THE

REV. J. MACGOWAN

AUTHOR OF "CHRIST OR CONFUCIUS: WHICH?",
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"ENGLISH AND CHINESE DICTIONARY OF THE AMOY DIALECT,"
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CHINESE FOLK-LORE

I.

A CHAPTER ON FAIRIES.

THE Chinese have the most profound belief in the existence of fairies. In their imagination, the hills and the mountains that are supposed to be the favourite resorts of these mysterious beings are all peopled with them, and from there they descend into the plains, and mingling in the guise of men and women amongst the masses of this Empire carry out their benevolent purposes in aiding the distressed and the forlorn.

The conceptions that people generally have about them are necessarily of a vague and indefinite character. They are fully convinced, however, that they are highly intelligent and with large and loving sympathies for everything human, and they also believe just as strongly that they have played an active part in connection with men during all the centuries of the past, and that, in the great crises through which men have been called to pass, they have made it a point to be present to help men come through their trials and to survive the calamities that might otherwise have destroyed them. During the changes of dynasties, and in times of revolution and anarchy when men's lives are accounted of little value, these benign beings are supposed specially to manifest themselves to aid as far as possible in alleviating human misery and in suggesting modes of escape from impending disasters.

Many names of benevolent fairies are mentioned who have thus appeared and who have distinguished themselves by the active part they have taken in times of great peril to

the men of the Middle Kingdom. Lau-tze is one of these. By ordinary historians he is looked upon simply as a great man who was born about the close of the sixth century B.C., and who became the founder of the Taoist system of philosophy. The romancists, however, and the students of fairy lore have a very different theory about him. They declare that he was originally a fairy, and that on several occasions he left the Western Heaven and became a man, in order that he might rescue men from the sorrows that the bad government of some vicious and unprincipled king was bringing on the country.

They appeal to his very name as an evidence that he did not enter into life as ordinary mortals do. Lau-tze translated into English means the aged son; for that most veracious thing, tradition, positively affirms that eighty-one years elapsed before his mother could give him birth, and that when finally he was born the hair with which his head was covered was as white as snow, whilst three wrinkles furrowed his forehead and gave him a prematurely old appearance.

That Lau-tze had various incarnations is very widely believed by the readers of fairy lore. It is positively asserted for example that he appeared during the latter days of the Sheng dynasty (B.C. 1766-1121), when the unprincipled conduct of its last king was causing rebellion among his nobles, and alienation of heart among his people generally. In the interests of the nation as a whole, Lau-tze had no hesitation whatever in espousing the popular side, and it is believed that he not only gave valuable advice to Prince Wu, the founder of the dynasty that succeeded the one just overthrown, viz., the Chow (B.C. 1122-255), but also that the countless spirits that he summoned from the unseen world fought on the side of the rebellious nobles and finally secured them the victory.

Prince Wu, the founder of the great Chow dynasty, is a famous man in the annals of China, and his name is always linked with those of the distinguished Kings Yao and Shun, who, in the estimation of the Chinese, are the beau-ideal rulers, whose reign brought untold blessings upon the

Flowery Land. That this prince was so successful in the government of China was mainly due, it is believed, to the influence that this fairy counsellor exercised over him, and to the wise counsels that he was able to give him in all the emergencies in which he was placed.

It is said that whilst Lau-tze was in the service of King Wu, he was sent on an embassy to the far-off Roman Empire on an errand of mercy. News had reached China that the prisoners in Rome were treated with exceptional cruelty, and that prison life was of such an exceedingly barbarous character that few were able to survive the hardships they had to endure. Lau-tze's heart was deeply moved with the pathetic stories that he heard from the travellers who had journeyed far into the regions of the West, and he determined that he would go and see for himself whether men were so brutally treated as had been described to him. Human life in Rome was as dear to him as it was in the more favoured land of China, and he could not remain content until he had done his utmost to alleviate the ills that men were enduring in the terrible prisons of that famous capital.

Approaching King Wu one morning he begged for leave of absence for a few months, as he had most important business which he wished to transact and which would ill brook any delay. Permission having been given, Lau-tze walked a little way out of the city, when a mighty eagle, that a moment ago had been but a speck on the blue sky, came swifter than the swiftest arrow that had ever been sped from bow straight to where he was standing, and allowing him to be seated on its back, flew with incredible swiftness away towards the setting sun. Before the day was gone, Lau-tze was standing within the seven-hilled city, habited in the guise of a stranger who had come to visit the wonders of this far-famed town.

Making his way to one of the largest prisons in the place in order that he might see for himself whether the prisoners were really treated as badly as had been reported he found the condition of things a thousand times worse than any language could possibly describe. The atmosphere was fetid with the evil odours that everywhere prevailed, whilst

cruel tortures such as only could have been devised by minds from which the sentiment of pity had been for ever banished kept the unhappy prisoners in one long continued pain and misery.

The heart of Lau-tze was so deeply distressed by what he saw, that he began incontinently to loose the bonds of the wretched beings whose sighs and tears filled his whole soul with agony. Whilst he was engaged in this gracious act, the gaoler came in and, thunderstruck at such an act, he had him seized and conveyed by force to the palace of the Roman ruler, in order that he might decide what adequate punishment should be meted out to him for such an act of rebellion against the laws of the state. As such a deed was unknown in the annals of Rome, it was deemed that only the king himself could decide what should be done with a man who dared commit so great a crime as this. The result, however, was very different from what these men whose souls had been steeped in cruelty had expected. When Lau-tze was dragged into the presence of the sovereign there was something about him that seemed to quench the fiery passion that had flamed up within the king's breast when he had listened to the accusation that had been made. He had no idea, indeed, that the man who stood before him was a fairy that had come from the far-off Western Heaven, full of a purpose to ease the sorrows of men, wherever he found them in need of that divine sympathy which is such a sweetener of human life everywhere. Still there was something about this stranger that commanded his attention, such as ordinary men had never done before. Lau-tze defended himself against the misconception that he was conspiring against the State, and pleaded the cause of the unhappy prisoners with such eloquence that the stern ruler was moved to compassion, and orders were given that in all the prisons in Rome a more merciful system of treatment should be at once adopted and carried out.

It is confidently asserted that Lau-tze has since that early period appeared in every dynasty, sometimes once and sometimes more frequently in each, just as any great emergency in the life of the nation seemed to demand his presence

and his help. He is not the only one, however, who is supposed to be watching over the interests of China. Countless others, scattered throughout the eighteen provinces, have endeared themselves to the people of the different localities to whom they have made their manifestations, and the folk-lore is full of quaint and amusing stories as to how the noted fairies have appeared at some critical time in the history of men and women, and have been the means of delivering them from extreme peril or sorrow.

The common theory about fairies is that originally they were all men and women, who were born of human parentage and passed through the common experiences that mankind have to encounter. They were not content, however, to submit to pain and sorrow and death, things that men usually deem inevitable; but their hearts were warmed with a nobler ambition, and they determind to work out a salvation from such and thus to emerge into a condition where life would be unending and where no sadness should ever cloud their spirits, and no tears ever dim their eyes.

The first step to this condition of immortality must be an absolutely pure life. There must be no yielding to evil, neither in thought nor in action. Every wrong passion must be sternly repressed and only thoughts of good must be dwelt upon. The one essential thing about this goodness is that there must be a profound love for man. Any ill-will to man or any indifference to his well-being would at once arrest any progress that had been made towards a fairy life.

In addition to these requisite qualifications there is also a very rigorous discipline that must be endured, if a man would hope to be delivered from the human conditions that bind him down to earth. He must gradually give up all the ordinary food of men, and live on certain herbs that are to be found on the mountains. He must search out for the elixirs of immortality that are hidden from the gaze of ordinary men, but are discoverable to those whose purpose it is to become fairies. After a certain course of this diet, the body loses its coarseness and becomes more ethereal, so that it mounts in the air and can travel long distances without any fatigue whatsoever. In all his travels, however, or

in his repression of the merely sensuous part of his nature, the man must never forget that he must continually keep before him some great benevolent purpose by which men are to be benefited. The love of money, too, must be absolutely banished from his mind and no selfish thought of enriching himself must ever be allowed to enter his heart.

Many instances in fairy literature are given showing the methods by which men have been able to emancipate themselves from the thraldom of life and to become members of the Western Heaven. One of these was named Tung Fung, who was a famous physician during the period known in history as the Kingdoms (A.D. 221-265). That his fame was no mere ephemeral one is manifest by the fact that his image is seen to-day in the druggists' shops, and that he is worshipped as a benefactor by those who earn their living by the sale of medicines.

Some of his cures were very remarkable. One of these was effected on a man who was an official in the service of the government. He had been very seriously ill and had apparently died, for he lay for three days in a comatose condition and to all intents and purposes had departed this life. Tung Fung was called in to see if he had any medicines that would cure him, when, taking a small pill that he had brought with him, he inserted it between the lips of the man that lay insensible, and in a few minutes the eyes opened, the flush of health overspread the face, and the man sat up and before many days had elapsed had perfectly recovered. Another still more remarkable case was that of a leper, who was so affected by the original treatment that he used that, not only was the disease driven out of the blood, but the skin which had been blotched and ulcerated was completely renewed, so that no traces of the terrible and loathsome disease were left within his system.

The fame of this distinguished doctor had spread into far distant districts and people with all kinds of diseases came to be treated by him. His pity for poor suffering humanity was so great that he gave up his life entirely to serve those that were sick, and he counted it his greatest joy to deny himself and to use his great knowledge of medicine for the

benefit of those who were prostrated with sickness. In order to guard himself against the temptation of becoming rich and so becoming careless in his great benevolent work of easing the sorrows of men who were afflicted by disease, he made a stringent rule that he never violated, and that was, that he would never take a fee from a single patient. The only thing that he asked any one of them to do was to plant the seed of an almond tree, with which he supplied him, in the large grounds connected with his house. In time these grew up and formed a beautiful and fragrant grove consisting of as many as seventy thousand trees, which at the time when they were in blossom filled the air with their perfume and presented a picture so lovely and so charming that people came in crowds to see the wonderful sight. Considerable sums were realized by the sale of the flowers and fruit, and the money so obtained was used in assisting his poor patients and in relieving the needy that sought his aid from far and near.

Tradition holds that Tung Fung continued to live for hundreds of years, healing the sick and relieving the wants of mankind, until, having been refined and purified by endless good deeds, he was at last deemed fit to enter the Western Heaven, where, on a larger and more extended scale, he could devote his energies to the assistance of men throughout the wide world.

Another distinguished man who lived during the Han dynasty (B.C. 206 to A.D. 23) was also a man who had an intimate knowledge of diseases. His name was Tsu Tan and his image is also set up in the druggists' shops, and his treatise on medicine and his prescriptions for all manner of diseases are sedulously studied and carried out by the doctors of the present day. So famed was this man that his books were printed in Japan, and for many centuries the doctors there were guided by them; and it is only latterly, since the introduction of Western medical science, that these have begun to fall into disuse.

Tsu Tan was a man greatly beloved by the fairies, for he was so constitutionally built that the transition stage between the human and the spiritual realms of being was

for him an exceedingly short one, and was accomplished in a comparatively brief period of time. He was noted for his devotion to his mother. His father had died when he was quite young and he seemed to throw the whole of his heart and all the affection that he was capable of into the one supreme purpose of making his mother happy.

The spiritual beings that hover about watching human actions were greatly captivated by this display of filial piety, and they lavished their gifts upon him, so that he became a master in curing diseases that the ordinary doctors never attempted to heal. His well-known treatise was, it is popularly believed, no doubt inspired by the fairies. His zeal in saving men was so highly appreciated by them that they agreed that the years of probation through which mortals on ordinary occasions were to pass before they could be admitted within their ranks should be very greatly shortened.

One day a flight of storks alighted near his home and to Tsu Tan's astonishment, when he came near to see the strange sight, they were all transformed into young men, who addressed him in courteous language and informed him that they had just arrived from the Western Heaven with orders from those in authority there to take him back with them to that far-off abode of bliss which he was henceforward to consider his home. Having got permission to go and tell his mother this wonderful news, he approached her with a heart full of the tenderest affection and with sorrowful forebodings as to how she would take this eternal separation from him. When he first told her, she was in despair, and with a voice broken with emotion she asked him how she was going to live without him. "You know," she said, "that I have no one to depend upon but you, and that without you I should die."

Her son endeavoured to comfort her by telling her that he had made ample provision for her so that she need never fear that she would ever be in want, no matter how long her life might be. "I have laid in a stock of my most famous medicines," he said "that I have never found to fail even in the most severe cases. When any sick person applies to you for medicine give him some of them. I want to tell

you," he continued, "that in the course of a few months plague will break out in this district, and people will apply to you for some of my well-known drugs. Never send any one away," he said, "and never make any charge. If any one wishes of his own free will to make you a present do not have any hesitation in accepting it. Be sure and receive all such gifts, and you will find that these will be so numerous that they will form a moderate estate for you and give you an income that with care will keep you from want as long as you live."

With some more loving words of comfort Tsu Tan tore himself away from his weeping mother and, when she rushed to the door to catch another glimpse of the son that she loved with such passionate devotion, he had disappeared. All that she could see was a flight of herons winging their flight up towards the blue sky and in a few seconds they were lost in the immensity of space.

As Tsu Tan had predicted, a plague of a very virulent character broke out in the county in which his mother lived, and great was the sorrow in many a home at the deaths that were caused by it. In time people got to know that Tsu Tan's medicine was most efficacious and that only one dose was needed to heal any one that had been attacked by this terrible disease. The result was that the mother's house was besieged for weeks with persons whose friends were in danger, and presents kept pouring in upon her from those who were grateful that their loved had been rescued by her from a terrible death by the medicines she had so generously dispensed. The outcome was that with the money and the goods she received she was enabled to buy lands that produced sufficient harvests to fill her home with plenty.

The fairies that have been described above have all risen from the ranks of men into the high and exalted position they now occupy and therefore they stand the highest in the estimation of men generally and are reverenced by all classes of society. There is another class, however, which are of a humbler origin, but which, through the exercise of the virtues of goodness and mercy, can gradually rise from their humble ancestry in the world of life until

they at last become fairies and are endowed with supernatural powers that enable them to work the strangest freaks and the most marvellous miracles in the new world into which they have been permitted to intrude.

The class that I refer to are the lower animals, who, it is believed, are now forever condemned to remain in the low scale in the economy of nature that they now occupy, but by character they can be so transferred that even they can attain to the high honour of becoming men and women. It is true that this privilege of ascending in the scale of life is restricted to certain animals only, and that beyond these the rest must for ever remain where heaven has placed them.

Among the wild animals the tiger, the monkey, the deer, and, *par excellence*, the fox, are supposed to have the power of developing into higher forms of life, whilst they always retain the facility for returning at any moment they choose to the natures with which they started existence in the world. Among birds, the crane, the phœnix, the eagle, and the parrot are the favoured few that are believed to be able to attain to supernatural powers, whilst the dragon, the turtle, the snake, and the whale have been credited with possibilities in their lives that enable them in time to raise themselves not only to be the equals of men, but also to surpass the great mass of mankind in the working of wonders, and in the display of miracles.

The method by which these mighty transformations are effected amongst the lower animals is precisely similiar to that by which men are changed into fairies and become members of the Western Heaven. It is by goodness, tenderness, and mercy, and also by a profound belief in the sanctity of life. A tiger, for example, naturally delights in killing not simply for the purpose of providing itself with food, but also to satisfy its savage thirst for blood. It will kill a sheep in order to satisfy its hunger, but at the same time it will mangle and tear in pieces a dozen more that it can never devour, and it will leave their carcases on the hillside without any thought of returning to them when next needing a meal. Now the first step in the evolution of a tiger is the repression of this instinct for slaughter. It will be so

filled with pity for the helpless animal that comes within its power, that it will let it go without injuring it. The effect of this on the animal itself is immense. A new conception of the value of life grows within it and uplifts it. This gradually touches the very nature of the brute and in time its one great purpose is to preserve life and to assist those who are in danger of losing theirs. A divine pity for the weak and helpless impels it to become a kind of knight errant that causes it to wander over districts where the most savage animals roam, and to use its prodigious strength in defence of animals that would speedily fall a prey to it.

The next process in the development of these lower animals is that they become gnomes who wander amongst the mountains, fly in the air, and revel in the storm; whose voices can be heard when the great typhoons rage and roar and their mighty blasts terrify men with the fear of sudden destruction. It is very often the case that, at this stage of their evolution, the process of redemption comes to a tragic end. They are not able to stand the temptation that their new powers give them. They were once roaming the forests in search of blood with savage and degraded instincts. Now they are the monarchs of the air, with apparently unlimited possibilities before them, and the finer virtues that they had cultivated gradually disappear as the savage taint in their natures once more asserts itself. The result is that they perish, whilst those that show that they have inherent virtue within themselves gradually advance in perfection, until they are turned into fairies and are associated in the Western Heaven with the virtuous men and women who through long trial have gradually won their way from the trammels of earth to that eternal abode of bliss.

II.

THE INFAMOUS CHOW SIN AND THE BEAUTIFUL T'A KI.

It is related by the early writers of the national affairs of China, that the infamous King Chow Sin, on one occasion, paid a visit to the temple of a famous female spirit named Lu O. This honoured goddess was held in the highest veneration by the Chinese in those far-off distant ages. She was the daughter of a spirit that lived in a very remote period still further back and was distinguished for the purity of her life and for the extraordinary powers she possessed. It is believed that she was present at the creation of all things, and when Panku made the great division between the firmament and the earth and the former was in danger of collapsing, she used her power to prop it up, so that it has remained in its place until the present day. Her fame rests mainly upon the high character she had acquired for a chaste and virtuous life, that even in those early days exercised such a charm over her worshippers.

In this temple there was a beautiful statue of Lu O. Chow Sin was so charmed and entranced with her beauty that he immediately experienced a passionate longing that she should become one of the royal concubines. Unfortunately for himself he expressed this desire in the presence of some of his great ministers who accompanied him, and the virtuous Lu O was so indignant at the insult that the king had offered her, that she determined to avenge herself by the most condign punishment upon the exalted offender. She accordingly summoned to her presence one of the chiefs amongst the demons, and gave him instructions to set in motion all his forces and all the great army of gnomes under his control for the utter destruction of the king, as well as his dynasty and all the members of the Imperial family and clan. "Do not spare this royal voluptuary," she said, "and

stay not your hand until the wrong he had done me be avenged in the disgrace and ruin of all those that bear his name."

When he returned to his palace, Chow Sin still raved about the marvellous beauty of Lu O, and expressed his sorrow that it was impossible for him to have her enrolled amongst the members of his harem, but, since it was impossible for him to obtain her, he would wish inquiries to be made throughout his empire to see if there were not amongst the beauties of China some one more distinguished than the rest who could adequately fill the place of the goddess Lu O. The ministers of the crown advised that a royal edict should be promulgated throughout the country forbidding the betrothal of any more maidens until the emperor had been given the opportunity of selecting from amongst the most beautiful of them the ones that might be deemed suitable to be included in the number of his concubines.

This is the first time that this custom is mentioned in Chinese history, though in later times it has become thoroughly domesticated in the empire. When the emperor takes to himself a royal spouse, it is by no means an infrequent thing for an edict to be issued interdicting all betrothals until the lady has been selected out of the numerous beauties that the viceroys throughout the country send up to the capital to undergo the inspection of those who have the management of this important matter.

That this is a thoroughly Oriental custom and one that was prevalent in other countries beyond the confines of the Celestial Empire can easily be proved by a reference to the Book of Esther. There it will be found that that famous personage became queen of the Persian monarch, by just this same capricious method of selection that was suggested to Chow Sin by the high mandarins who assisted him in the government of the country. The emperor is so entirely supreme in China that no one would dream of questioning his right to such an exercise of arbitrary power in the disposal of the persons of his subjects. The possibility, moreover, of one of their daughters being selected to become the queen of China, reconciles the high families of the land to a custom that would be utterly abhorrent to the people of the West.

As such a procedure had never been adopted in the past, there was considerable discussion as to whether such a thing could be carried out without danger to the stability of the throne. The conservative element in the Chinese character even in those pristine ages of the world began to manifest itself, and the best thinkers of the day looked with great jealousy upon any extension of the royal prerogative that threatened to infringe upon the liberties of the people.

The situation for the moment was saved by the intervention of the Prime Minister Iu Hui, who nourished a deep grudge against one of the viceroys, who was of a bold and independent character and who had grievously offended him by refusing to pay court to him when his duties called him to the capital. The last time he had been there this viceroy had treated him with scant courtesy and had absolutely refused to make him the ordinary presents by which the high officials propitiated him, so that he vowed to take vengeance whenever a good opportunity offered.

The time had now come when Iu thought he could wound him in a way that would bring him the greatest possible distress. Approaching the emperor he said, "Your Majesty is desirous of finding a lady in China that would equal the famous goddess Lu O in the beauty of her person. Such a lady exists, and if common fame is to be believed, never in the annals of the past has any woman been possessed of such charms as she is credited with. No royal edict is required to demand the attendance of the beauties of China at your court, for this lovely girl is the daughter of one of your viceroys, and you have but to command her father to bring her to your palace, and you will never more desire to have Lu O as one of the members of your harem."

By giving this advice to the emperor, Iu Hui believed that he was inflicting a deadly wound upon the viceroy in question, for he was firmly of the conviction that if his royal master acted upon his suggestion, the final result would be the disgrace and death of the bold and independent ruler of one of the provinces of the empire. Su Heu, for so he was named, possessed a large amount of sterling and original character. He was more like a typical Englishman than

the suave, diplomatic Chinese official, for he was always prepared to speak out his mind boldly and fearlessly without any regard for consequences. He was deeply beloved by all the people, high and low and rich and poor, within the province over which he ruled, for he meted out justice to all alike, no matter what their position in life might be.

He had one daughter of whom he was inordinately proud, and good reason he had to be so. She was an exceedingly beautiful girl, the loveliest, perhaps, that had ever been born within the broad and extensive limits of the Flowery Kingdom. His very life seemed bound up in T'a Ki. There was nothing in the world so precious to him as this beloved daughter, and all his wealth and power combined seemed as nothing in his eyes when compared with this beautiful creature, who repaid his love with the most tender and devoted affection. Iu Hui knew that in bringing her to the Imperial notice he was going to injure Su Heu in a manner that would leave its deepest sting upon his heart, whilst at the same time the destruction of himself and his entire family would be certainly accomplished.

No sooner had the glowing description of T'a Ki been given to the dissolute and depraved emperor, than he gave immediate orders to the prime minister to send out a dispatch, post haste, to Su Heu, requiring his attendance at once in the capital, together with that of his beautiful daugther T'a Ki, who, it was declared, was to have the honour of becoming one of his august Majesty's concubines.

In Hui's schemes of vengeance were most admirably devised and produced the exact results that his cunning mind had foreseen, but he little dreamed of the dire and tragic consequences that were to come to himself and his royal master in the near future, and that he was but a pawn in the hand of fate in the game of life that was being played, when the wrongs that had been committed by Chow Sin would be terribly avenged by the wiping out of his dynasty and the destruction of all those who had helped him in the misgovernment of the country.

The receipt of the Imperial rescript, filled Su Heu with the greatest consternation. To most men it would have

been the source of satisfaction and delight. To have a daughter of such distinguished beauty in the royal harem, who might possibly one day become queen meant that honours and power and wealth would be lavished upon her family and that it would become one of the powerful ones of the state.

Su Heu, however, was made of nobler materials than to be willing to have his fortunes built on the degradation of his beloved daughter.

Without one moment's hesitation, he replied to the royal demand by absolutely refusing to comply with it. "Your Majesty," he said, "has done me the honour of asking for my daughter to become one of your concubines. I am not worthy of it. Besides, she is very dear to me, and I cannot endure the thought of losing her companionship, which I should assuredly do were she to become a member of your harem. In the whole of your kingdom there are many beautiful girls that would deem it an honour to be selected by your Majesty, and whose parents would only be too glad to be allied to you by the gift of their daughters. Send out a royal proclamation expressing your wish and you will assuredly have a noble collection of the beauties of the empire from which to make your selection. As for my daughter, I positively refuse to allow her to go to the capital."

The king was enraged beyond measure at what he considered the rebellious language of his viceroy and he determined to give him such a lesson in obedience that he would never dare transgress again. He accordingly raised a large army and sent it under skilful generals against Su Heu, with the order to bring him and his daughter T'a Ki with all haste into his presence. The doughty viceroy was not, however, to be so easily conquered as he had imagined. The first symtoms of rebellion against this dissolute and unprincipled monarch had already begun to spread throughout the kingdom, and men's minds were concerned at the carnival of vice and misgovernment that was being carried on in the capital.

Ere the royal forces had reached the territories of Su Heu, the whole of his province had risen in arms for his defence and in the battles that took place the king's troops were defeated with great slaughter and were compelled to retreat. Chow Sin, instead of being discouraged by the repulses that the royal army had suffered, became more determined in his purpose that the beautiful T'a Ki should be surrendered to him. He therefore collected another army, larger and better equipped than the one that he had sent before, with orders that, if necessary, the whole of the revolted province should be laid waste by fire and sword, its inhabitants utterly exterminated, and Su Heu brought in chains to the capital, there to expiate his offences by the most terrible death that the imagination of man could conceive.

The royal army was led by the finest generals of the country and the bravest troops had been selected from the other provinces in order that success should this time be obtained over the rebellious viceroy, but the men were lacking in enthusiasm and their feeling was rather in favour of the enemy they were about to attack than for the sovereign whose orders they were obeying. Chow Sin was a tyrant who was despised and hated because of his vices and his crimes, whilst Su Heu was a hero, who was fighting for his home and for the honour and safety of his beloved daughter. Another great battle was fought and once more the soldiers of the king suffered a tremendous defeat.

This process was repeated several times, when Wun Wang, the viceroy of Shansi, who was a friend of Su Heu and who dreaded the effect of his rebellion upon the rest of the empire, wrote him an urgent letter beseeching him to submit to the royal demand and give the king his daughter. "You cannot hope," he said, "with the power of your one province successfully to resist the forces of the whole kingdom. In the end you will have to submit and a vengeance will be wreaked upon you and your whole clan, as well as upon the whole of your people. The other viceroys of the kingdom have stood aloof as long as possible from this contest, but ere long they will be compelled by the orders of the king to marshal their forces against you, and you are

wise enough to see that when that takes place you will inevitably be crushed before the overwhelmingly large number of troops that can be brought against you."

These wise and weighty words of Wun Wang, who ultimately became the leader in the great rebellion that after a time rent the kingdom in pieces, and who became the founder of the great Chow Dynasty, B.C. 1122-255, made a deep impression upon Su Heu. He accordingly sent in his submission to the king and informed him that upon a certain day he would proceed to the capital in order to obtain his forgiveness, and that his daughter T'a Ki would accompany him, and that he would place her at the disposal of his Majesty to do with her whatever he thought best. Hostilities upon this at once ceased and preparations were made by the sorrowful viceroy for the surrender of his beloved daughter.

Rebellion has from the earliest ages been looked upon with the utmost horror by all classes of the community in China. The sorrows it entails upon the innocent and the calamities it brings upon the regions where it is in active operation are so tremendous, that the severest punishments have always been meted out to those who have been the leaders of it. In the case of high offenders, the utter destruction of the man himself and the relatives of his father, mother, and wife for three generations is enacted. This law is mercilessly carried out, and every man, woman, and child is ruthlessly put to death, even though many of them had never been cognizant of the crime of their distinguished relative, or had been indeed active opposers to it. This is an ancient law of China that has the approbation of the whole of the people of China.

An outline of the story is given in the Imperial History of China of the causes that led to the destruction of the Shang Dynasty. In it the historian describes how that T'a Ki, the daughter of Su Heu, was captured in war B.C. 1146, and was presented to King Chow Sin. She was exceedingly beautiful, but utterly immoral and inhuman. Her beauty so fascinated the king that he came completely under her control. As the great vassals grievously complained

of the scandalous and infamous goings on at the court, T'a Ki determined upon having her revenge upon them and so she invented several modes of punishment by which many of the leading men were put to death. The misgovernment of Chow Sin at length became so intolerable that the nation rose in rebellion against him, and after a great battle in which the royal forces were defeated, T'a Ki was captured and put to death.

It is very singular that the previous dynasty, called the Hia (B.C. 2205-1818), suffered a collapse from causes very similar to those that caused the destruction of the Shang. A beautiful concubine of the name of Mo Hi, exercised such a baneful influence upon the reigning sovereign, that in a whirlwind of passion the dynasty was destroyed by the enraged people, and the Shang took its place, to be in time swept away because of precisely similar causes that had caused the disappearance of the Hia.

The Chinese romancer has a very different and a much more exciting tale to tell. He declares that the causes of the revolution that ended in the overthrow of Chow Sin and his dynasty was the insult that had been offered to Lu O in her temple. He graphically describes how the demon she had summoned from the other world and to whom she had committed the task of carrying out her revenge had ever been on the look out for some propitious moment when he could intervene and most effectually fulfil the purpose of the goddess. He saw that the time had actually arrived when his fell schemes for the destruction of Chow Sin could be carried out without any danger of discovery. These were so skilfully laid that, as far as mortals were concerned, not the wisest of his ministers nor the most devoted of his followers would be able to give him a hint of the danger with which he was threatened.

On a certain day, in accordance with a prescribed programme that he had drawn up for himself, Su Heu with considerable misgivings as to the future, set forth with T'a Ki on his journey to the capital. His heart was rent with agony about her. He had done his very utmost to deliver her from the fate that lay before her, but he had been worsted in the

contest and to save her was absolutely beyond his power. Another source of anxiety was the character of Chow Sin. He was a man of absolutely no moral character and he might feel that, when once he had got possession of T'a Ki, he would revenge himself upon her father for his rebellion by putting him to an ignominious death. It may, therefore, be imagined with what sorrowful feelings both father and daughter left their home to go on a journey that caused the hearts of both of them to be filled with so many doleful forebodings. Little did either of them dream that a great and tragic change was to take place before they reached the end of it, that would involve the most serious consequence both to T'a Ki and the very empire itself.

The long and painful travelling had nearly come to an end, and they had reached the last resting-place that lay between them and the capital. On the morrow they would be there, and they then would both be within the grip of the infamous Chow Sin. It may easily be imagined what a sorrowful evening they spent with each other, and the hearts of both must have been almost on the point of breaking as they thought of the separation that would take place next day, when their lives would for ever be divided, the one from the other, and the old familiar ties with which they had been bound to each other in the past would be severed, never again to be reunited.

T'a Ki had retired to her room only a few minutes when the demon who had been commissioned by the insulted goddess to avenge her wrongs upon Chow Sin entered the apartment and put her to death. He then by his necromantic powers entered the body of the dead maiden, which, animated by this new spirit, had all the semblance of the beautiful girl that but a few minutes previously had been alive and full of health. To all outward appearance she was the same lovely and modest girl who had everywhere won golden opinions not simply for the beauty of her person, but also for the refined and tender spirit that had made her life so charming to all who had any acquaintance with her.

On the morrow morning when Su Heu met his daughter, and they had started on the final stage of their journey

to the capital, he had not the remotest suspicion that he was not talking to T'a Ki, but to a malign demon who had murdered her, and who was filled with the maddest schemes that ever took possession even of so degraded a being's brain, for the destruction of a royal family.

Su Heu had no idea that any change had taken place in his daughter. The one that had assumed her rôle acted her part so perfectly that there was nothing in her demeanour that could cause him for a moment to suspect that he was being imposed upon. Her person was the same, and the voice and manner and little ways of T'a Ki were so faithfully reproduced, that it never entered into the heart of anyone to question her identity.

When the party reached the capital and were led into the presence of the king, he was so enamoured with the beauty of T'a Ki that he seemed to come at once under her spell. There was full reason for this, for not only was the woman before him the most beautiful one in the kingdom, but she had also the power by the black arts that were at her control to influence Chow Sin's mind in a way that no merely human being could ever hope to succeed in doing. He was so delighted indeed that he accorded a most gracious reception to Su Heu, and gave him complete forgiveness for his disobedience to him and for his daring to resist the forces he had sent against him when he refused to comply with his demands.

A very short time had elapsed before Chow Sin came completely under the control of T'a Ki, whose influence over him was always for evil. This was entirely in accordance with the plan that had been designed for the destruction of himself and his whole family. Instead of restraining him, she invented new methods by which he should shock the kingdom through his disgraceful irregularities both in his government and in his own personal conduct. The court had always been a highly immoral one, but, since the arrival of the new favourite, it had gone beyond anything that had ever disgraced it in the past in its shameful profligacy and utter disregard for the opinion of the nation.

Signs of uneasiness began to be manifested throughout the kingdom, so outraged became the public sentiment at

the conduct of Chow Sin and T'a Ki, and a general feeling prevailed that unless there was a change there would be a revolution that would end in the destruction of the dynasty. Some of the more faithful of his councillors remonstrated with the king, but they were promptly put to death in a most cruel and savage way by the express orders of this infamous woman. Some of the leading vassals of the empire who had complained of the dissolute extravagance of the sovereign were put to death by new and ingenious methods that had been specially devised by T'a Ki. One of these was called the "roasting punishment." This consisted of a tube of copper covered with grease, which was placed above a pit that was filled with burning charcoal. The victims were compelled to walk along this slippery bridge, until they fell into the fiery furnace below.

The condition of things at length became so intolerable that viceroys and nobles and dukes and earls, to the number of eight hundred, combined their forces and rebelled. Prince Wu became their commander-in-chief, because of his military ability and also because of the nobility of his character. After a good many skirmishes with the royal forces a great battle was fought when Prince Wu gained a decided victory. Chow Sin was captured and put to death. T'a Ki was also amongst the prisoners, but tradition has it that her beauty was so great that no one could be found to deal the final blow that was to deprive her of life. Several were appointed to execute her, but there seemed a power of enchantment about her that, no sooner did anyone come near her, than their arms dropped paralyzed, so potent were the powers that her charms exercised. At length an aged councillor of Prince Wu, covering his face with a thick cloth so that he might not see her face stepped forward and with one mighty thrust of his sword laid the enchantress low. With her death the Shang dynasty passed away and Prince Wu, the successful general in the battles of the revolution, became the founder of the famous Chow line of monarchs that is so distinguished in the annals of the Chinese empire.

T'a Ki is credited with being the founder of the custom of footbinding that has been in existence in China, which by

its peculiarity has distinguished this country from every other nation in the world. The writer of the fairy story endeavours to explain how this took place by telling that the evil spirit that entered the body of T'a Ki after he had murdered her, belonged to the fox tribe, and that when it assumed her form, its feet by some accident retained the shape that a fox's foot has. In order to disguise this it had to use ingenious wrappings to prevent people from suspecting it. After the supposed T'a Ki became queen, which she soon did by the murder of her predecessor, the ladies of her court in order to gain favour with her, crippled their feet into the very smallest size so as to resemble hers.

That footbinding has always been believed to have been associated with T'a Ki is certain. The mythological explanation is, of course, absurd. The more rational one is that there was some natural deformity in T'a Ki's feet that she endeavoured to disguise, and that her maids of honour, in order to curry favour with her, did their best to deform their own and to make them as small as stringent binding would make them. The whole subject is an obscure one and authentic history throws no light upon the origin of this hideous and baneful custom. It is a pleasant thing to know that it is doomed, and in a few years will be unknown in China.

III.

THE FAIRY AND THE PEAR SELLER.

ONE day an itinerant seller of pears had placed his wheelbarrow close by the edge of a road along which streams of people passed and repassed from early dawn until the evening shadows lay so thickly on the rough, uneven road that it became unsafe to travel along it. He had laid in a choice collection of this popular fruit* to tempt the taste of those whom business or pleasure had sent to journey along this famous thoroughfare. Some of them were large and voluptuous looking and were shaped more like the russet apples of other lands. Others were smaller and less presumptuous in their looks, but none of them had the ideal shape that the pear with us loves to take. The colour too showed that they were all the product of the Far East, for the great sun had put the mark of his fiery breath upon them, and they were of a beautiful brown, though no other tint or shade would ever be allowed to cast their colouring.

A few idlers stood lounging about, men with no cash in their pockets, but with eyes that cast longing glances upon the well-heaped barrow, where the pears had been so deftly arranged as to catch the eye of the thirsty travellers that came along the dusty road. By and by amidst the various figures that came in view, there appeared an old man with a diminutive hoe slung across his right shoulder. He had the look of a farmer, who had just come from his fields. His clothes, which were made of the popular blue cloth, were slouchy and untidy, and put on with the indifference of his

* The pear in China is a far inferior fruit to that of Europe. The Chinese have never apparently taken the trouble to try to develop it. It has been left very much to nature, and no art has been employed by crossing or by scientific cultivation to produce a fruit that shall show the pleasing qualities that really exist in it, if men would but take the trouble to bring them out. It is of a brown colour, and so hard that it requires good teeth to bite through it, and it is wanting in the juiciness and flavour of the home fruit.

class for any regard to personal appearance. His head had not been shaved for more than a week, and the black bristly crop of hairs that stood out defiantly around the crown, from which the queue grew, gave him an untidy and neglected look. He was evidently a man in poor circumstances, and yet there was something in the flash of his eye and in the air of intelligence that pervaded his countenance that gave one the impression that he was in some way different from the other men who travelled along the great highway.

No sooner did he catch sight of the heap of pears that lay in such rich profusion on the barrow, than he stayed his steps, and appealing to the owner of them, begged him to give him just one, that he might quench his thirst with it. "Get away, you lazy beggar," the man cried out in reply, "my pears are for sale and not to be given away to every thriftless wretch that takes a fancy to them."

"But I am an old man, and my money is all spent," replied the suppliant, "give me the smallest one on your barrow and you shall have my blessing in return."

"I do not want every rogue's blessing that comes along and has a design upon my fruit without any intention of paying for it. Be off, old man, and do not try any of your games on me, for you will most certainly not succeed."

The little crowd that had collected during this discussion evidently took the side of the old man. He looked so worn and so poverty stricken, that they appealed to the pear seller to grant his request. "Give him one," they said, "the smallest you have for sale. It is worth but little to you and it will give him a moment's comfort, whilst you will have the satisfaction of having done a virtuous and benevolent action."

"No," he replied, "I give nothing away. I am not ambitious of gaining a reputation for virtue. Why should not some of you put your hands into your pockets and buy one of my pears and give it to this old man for whom you profess so much sympathy?"

A man standing in the crowd at once drew forth a few cash from his pocket and buying a pear handed it with a few pleasant words to the old man. With a smile and a bow that

showed he was a gentleman he at once proceeded to eat the fruit, expressing his gratitude to the donor and also to the crowd that had been so sympathetic to a poor forlorn old man.

Having eaten all but the core, he carefully chose out one of the seeds in it, and, looking at it with the eye of a connoisseur, he declared to the crowd, that had been watching his proceedings with great interest, that he was so grateful to them for the interest they had shown in him that he was going to perform a little act that he thought would give them a moment's pleasure.

Taking down the small hoe that rested on his shoulder, he began to dig a hole in the ground into which he carefully placed the seed he had chosen, and then he gently pressed the earth upon it. Having done this he asked some of the onlookers, whose homes were near by, to bring him some hot water. Entering into the spirit of the fun, three of the young fellows that stood by ran off and in a few minutes returned with kettles of boiling water. As he poured this gently over the newly dug ground, the crowd, that little dreamed that the weather-beaten looking man was a fairy in disguise, looked with a quiet sense of amusement at the strange action that was being performed before them.

In a few moments a delicate green shoot was seen to issue from the earth, and grew so rapidly that in an incredibly short time the stem and branches and leaves of a full grown pear tree raised their shapely proportions before the astonished crowd. Whilst they were gazing with delight and amusement at the startling transformation, the tree put forth countless blossoms that covered it with the beauty of spring, and almost instantly these changed into fruit, which with a magic quickness ripened on the tree, and were ready for eating.

The crowd by this time had grown in dimensions. The story of the magic tree had spread like wildfire and the people with a look of wonder upon their faces came hurrying up from every direction to witness the wonderful sight. The old gentleman invited the younger lads to climb the tree and hand down the fruit that grew so luxuriantly on its branches. This they did with infinite pleasure and amidst the fun and

jokes of the people amongst whom the pears were distributed. The tree was soon stripped of the hundreds of tempting fruit that but a moment before made it look so beautiful and so attractive.

When the last pear had been plucked, the old man took his hoe once more and cut and hacked into the trunk of the tree near the ground and lo! in some mysterious way it seem to shrivel up and wither away just as rapidly as it had sprung up from the ground. In a few minutes nothing was left of the stately tree up which the lads had climbed with such glee, but only a single dry and withered stick, which the old man grasped in his hand and making a stately and formal bow to the wondering crowd he vanished down the road. The pear seller who had been a most eager spectator of the marvellous doings of the old man, so much so indeed that he entirely forgot all about his own pears, now turned to take his usual stand beside his barrow, when he found to his astonishment that it was completly empty, and that the rows and heaps of fruit that he had looked upon with such loving and tender regard had vanished and not a single vestige of them remained.

He was now in absolute despair at the loss, for all his capital had been invested in the pears His mind at once turned to the old man who had shown such wonderful magic powers and he concluded that he was having his revenge upon him for refusing him the pear that he had so earnestly begged for, and that the disappearance of his fruit was due to his wonder-working power.

Full of this idea he ran swiftly down the road along which the conjuror had disappeared, but he could find no trace of him. All that he could discover was the stick that he had finally carried away with him, and which to his amazement he found to be the upright pole attached to his barrow on which on sunny or drizzly days he fastened his umbrella to protect his pears from the sun or the rain.

As he walked back with downcast head and a shadow on his face, it suddenly seemed to dawn upon him that the old man whom he now knew to be a fairy had used his mysterious powers to shed a glamour over the eyes of the

crowd and to prevent them from seeing that the pears he had so freely distributed amongst them were really his own and not a new creation as everybody had supposed.

When men heard the story, they felt that the fairy that day had given a lesson in humanity that the pear seller and those who had been witnesses of his powers would never forget. He had taught men that there were powers at work that were ever ready to carry out the benevolent intentions of heaven, and that the man who hardened his heart against the cry for pity from his fellowmen would surely meet with his deserts in a way and place that he never dreamed of or expected.

IV.

THE LOVE ADVENTURES OF THE FOX FAIRY, PRINCE HU.

ONCE upon a time in the early and romantic days of China's history, there lived in the province of Shensi a wealthy scholar who was noted throughout the district in which he lived for his great literary attainments. His abilities had been of such a high order that he had actually been able to take his third degree of "Advanced Scholar," and consequently his name was known far and wide as that of a rising and distinguished man.

Mr. Lin, for so this scholar was named, was one of those men of genius that constitute the thinkers of China, and in due course of time its legislators as well. As he was a man of very considerable means he was in no hurry to accept the many high official posts that were offered him by the Government. His ambition, indeed, led him to desire to shine in the world of letters, and at the time that he appears upon the scene, he was engaged in the preparation of a great work on the classics, that, if it were only successful, would forever link his name with that of Confucius and Mencius, and thus secure immortal honour to himself and his clan.

It became necessary for him in the prosecution of his plans to engage a scholar to assist him in carrying out some of the details, for which he himself had no leisure. Such a man would be very difficult to obtain. Any ordinary hack would not serve his purpose. He must be a born student, who would be able to enter into the spirit of his great enterprise, and he must also have been a great reader so that he would have at his finger ends any reference which might have to be made to any of the authorities that it might be desirable to quote.

One day a servant informed Mr. Lin that a gentleman had called to see him and was now waiting for him in the

reception room. His card showed that his name was Hu, and the fact that he had one to send in indicated that he was a man that probably belonged to the scholar class. Mr. Lin, at the first glance at the stranger, was very much prepossessed in his favour. He was a fine, handsome man of about thirty years of age. He had a most intelligent-looking countenance and a refined air about him that unmistakably showed that he was a gentleman.

It did not take Mr. Lin long to discover that he was exceedingly well read, for there was not a book mentioned that he had not mastered its contents so fully that he could describe with great accuracy the subjects that were treated in it. Whilst they were engaged in a most brilliant conversation, he experienced an intense longing to be able to secure his services to assist him in the literary work on which he was engaged.

After a time Mr. Hu himself broached the subject, and said that he had heard that Mr. Lin was in search of a person to assist him on some book that he was preparing for the press, and as he had been on the look-out for some employment, he would be very pleased if he would consent to accept him as an assistant. This proposition was received with the greatest pleasure and after a short conversation in which the terms were discussed and settled, Mr. Hu became an inmate in the house of Mr. Lin.

Further acquaintance with this remarkable stranger only added to Mr. Lin's delight that he had been able to obtain such a thoroughly good man to assist him in the great enterprise that he hoped would place him amongst the distinguished scholars of China. He was a man of unwearied perseverance. He never seemed to tire, no matter how long the day might be, or how arduous the toil needed to elucidate some knotty point that had arisen in the discussion of some important question in Mr. Lin's great work.

He was a person also of the most profound erudition and scholarship. It soon became apparent, indeed, that he had at his finger ends all the best works that had appeared in any age in the history of the past, and could quote them with accuracy and effect whenever it was necessary to do so. He

was, in point of fact, a perfect encyclopædia in himself and endowed with a memory so perfect that he could utilize everything he had read without having continually to refer to the books themselves for the information he wished to use.

The one only unsatisfactory thing about Mr. Lin was the mystery that surrounded him. No information could be got from him as to where he came from, or where his family resided, or in what part of China he was born. The Chinese are usually very anxious to talk about such subjects, and they find great pleasure in going into detail about the members of their home and the position they occupy in society. On these subjects Hu was as silent as the grave, and not a word was breathed about them to a single member of the new home in which he was living. He seemed, indeed, not to have a single relative in existence, for no letters ever reached him from anywhere, and no reference was ever made of any kindred that belonged to him in any other part of China.

This state of things naturally produced suspicion in the minds of every one associated with him in the large patriarchal-like family of Mr. Lin. As he was a very wealthy man and belonged to a very powerful clan it numbered fully a hundred people that lived together within the same compound and that acknowledged him as their head. Besides the large array of servants that were necessary to do the work of so great an establishment, there were dependants of various grades and kinds who were employed in the more honourable service of waiting on Mr. Lin and of thus adding to his dignity and his prestige amongst the great families in the region around.

The position of Hu being one of great responsibility and honour, he naturally became the subject of observation to all the numerous members of this great household, and very frequently, in leisure moments, men would discuss amongst themselves this strange character who had so mysteriously and without any warning come as a resident amongst them. There was no disputing but that he was a very remarkable man. He was more handsome than any one they had ever seen. He was a genius of so high an

order that even their own master who had obtained with high honours the third degree of "The Advanced Man," confessed that he was far inferior to him in the matter of scholarship.

But who was he? That was a question they would like answered. They knew absolutely nothing about his antecedents. Although so profoundly learned he had never gone up for any of the triennial examinations and had never got even "The Embroidered Ability," the first of the degrees that is given to the successful undergraduate in this flowery land of China. This was a most decidedly mysterious thing, for the aim and passion of every scholar's life is to have his name enrolled among the successful aspirants after literary fame and to be classed among the thinkers of the empire.

As time went by and still the household was left to wonder and surmise about this gifted and handsome scholar, certain things began to happen that intensified the suspicions that people had entertained concerning him. It seemed to some of the more acute and observant that he was the possessor of supernatural powers, for they had seen on several occasions how completely he had control over matter. Stone walls that are a serious impediment to ordinary mortals suddenly dissolved into thin air when he came to pass through them, and just as speedily assumed their solid form the moment he had disappeared.

It was his custom, contrary to what is usual amongst the Chinese, to go out every evening just as the shadows were gathering thickly over the earth and were blotting out the narrow pathways along which men had then to travel. The gate-keeper would occasionally warn him that the roads were bad and that it would be wiser for him to remain within doors. He would answer with a merry laugh that his eyes were good and that he had no fear of falling, as he knew the country well, and besides he would add, "I must go out for a turn in the fresh air. I have been poring over those ancient books the livelong day, and I shall be getting as dry and as musty as they if I do not let some of the fresh breezes of heaven blow away the cobwebs that have been weaving themselves in my brain."

Sometimes by accident the door-keeper would be awake in the early hours of the morning when Hu would come stealing through the darkness. He would then give a cheery response to the greeting of the old man, and pass on to his room through the little side door that was always on the latch for late-comers. More often than not, however, he would sleep through the night and, though the great gates were safely barred and locked, he would find when he peeped at the dawn of day into Hu's bedroom that he was lying fast asleep, as though he had not been out the whole night.

On one occasion a great storm was raging, the blinding flashes of lightning were lighting up with lurid gleams the darkness that lay upon the earth, and the rain was being driven in torrents by the storm, when the door-keeper, who had been standing just within the shelter of his doorway, caught sight of Hu, in one of the vivid flashes, as he came silently along towards the main entrance. His instinct had been to rush out and open the door for him, but whilst he was hesitating he saw, to his amazement, that he had passed through the great gates as easily as though they had been flung wide open before him, and that, in a moment, he had vanished through the great stone wall of the mansion and had disappeared within the building.

It may be as well to explain here that Hu was a fairy, and that he had transformed himself into a man in order that he might gain the daughter of Mr. Lin for his wife. He had on several occasions caught sight of her, and he had been so struck with her beauty that he had fallen deeply in love with her.

The plan of turning himself into a scholar and of living in the same family had suggested itself to his mind as the best way of ingratiating himself with the father and of becoming acquainted with the daughter. The scheme, however, had been but partially successful, for though he was a general favourite, and every one admired his noble presence and looked up to him with profound respect for the marvellous abilities with which he was endowed, there was a feeling that he belonged to another race and that, therefore, there could be no common sympathies between him and ordinary

mortals. Even Mr. Lin, who looked upon him as a perfect treasure, and who valued him for the part he played in the production of his great work, had an uneasy feeling that he must be on his guard against him. The weird stories of his passing through walls, and of his careering over the country on the darkest nights, and of his coming like a flash unhurt through storm and tempest had left their impression on his mind, and he was beginning to wonder whether it was quite safe to have a man with such supernatural powers dwelling with him under the same roof.

One morning Hu was missing, and not a trace was left behind to say whither he had vanished. Some declared that he had disappeared in a flash of lightning. Others were quite as certain that he had transformed himself into a heron, and that he had joined a flock of these graceful birds that had been seen the previous evening flying with swift and speedy flight into the distant sky.

About a week after the mysterious disappearance of Hu, a stranger, riding a magnificent mule, rode up to the mansion of Mr. Lin, and requested to have a private interview with him on a question that was quite private and that could be communicated only to the master of the house. He was a very striking looking man and at once engaged the attention of the servants and dependants, whose duty it was to receive visitors and to see to their courteous reception until they were ushered into the presence of Mr. Lin.

He was tall and dignified and his bearing was that of one who had been accustomed to mingle in the very highest society. He was about fifty years of age, and his face indicated that he was a man of thought and of good breeding. After the compliments of the day had been passed, he informed Mr. Lin that he had come as an envoy from Mr. Hu to enter into negotiations with him with regard to his daughter whom he wished to have as his wife. As this proposal did not at all harmonize with the views that Mr. Lin had for his daughter, he endeavoured to parry it by declaring that she was already engaged, and that, whilst he was deeply sensible of the honour that had been done him by Hu, for whom he had the profoundest respect, he was sorry to say

that she had been already promised to another and therefore it was impossible for him to entertain the idea that had been presented to him.

The envoy, in as polite and refined a way as it was possible to be expressed, soon let Mr. Lin know that he knew perfectly well that the daughter never had been betrothed to anyone, and that his statement that she was merely evaded the question, and was anything but an answer to the demand that he had made for an alliance.

At this Mr. Lin, who was a proud and haughty man, began to lose his temper, and finally declared that he did not wish to have Hu as a son-in-law, and he, therefore, begged to decline to discuss the subject any further. The middleman politely asked him to state his objections so that he might report to his master, who, he declared, was desperately in love with his daughter. "You cannot possibly refuse this alliance," he said, "on the ground that he is not equal in rank to you. In point of fact, in this respect he is your superior, for he is of royal blood and comes of a race of kings."

"His rank does not concern me at all," Mr. Lin warmly replied; "Mr. Hu belongs to a different race from myself and therefore I decidedly refuse to allow my daughter to be married to him."

After some further conversation, in which high words were used, the envoy became so irritated that he used some insulting language to Mr. Lin, who promptly called some servants and had him ejected from the house. This was an indignity so great that the envoy fled away in the greatest haste, apparently forgetting all about the magnificent black mule on which he had ridden when he came to the interview that had ended so disastrously.

Whilst they were standing round gazing at this beautiful animal, to the amazement of everyone a most mysterious change began to pass over it. The exquisitely moulded limbs that everyone was admiring because of their grace and symmetry slowly stiffened and became rigid. Almost the next instant, its whole frame seemed to collapse till all that was left of it was a good-sized cricket, that with its shrill and

strident cry hopped away out of sight under some bushes that were growing near by.

Mr. Lin, who had always felt sure that Hu was a disguised fairy, now became convinced that his suspicions had been correct, and he felt that he must make immediate preparations to meet the attack that Hu would make upon him for the insulting way in which he had treated his envoy. Accordingly, that very same evening he sent round to the members of his clan and urged that every available man that could be spared should hasten without any delay to his assistance, and help him to meet the foe that he knew by instinct was already collecting his forces to avenge himself for the insults that had been offered him.

Well, indeed, was it for Mr. Lin that he so promptly took these precautionary measures, for early next day, whilst everyone was at his post waiting for the coming of the enemy, a large detachment of the fairy army was seen advancing in their direction. Some were on horseback and others on foot, and they were armed with spears, javelins, and long bows, whilst some grasped swords that gleamed in the sun as the men brandished them. They rushed on with a shout and a tread that seemed to shake the very ground beneath them.

The first effort of the fairies was to set the house on fire, but all their attempts were frustrated by the bravery of Mr. Lin's men. These fought with the most desperate courage, for they realized that their own lives and those of the women and children who were hiding terror-stricken within the building would all be sacrificed the moment they allowed the enemy to vanquish them. This thought, instead of bringing despair, nerved their arms in the gigantic struggle that was carried on for hours.

After a time the fairy host began to show symptoms of wavering, and upon a given signal the Chinese rushed forth from the building and made a furious onslaught upon the broken ranks of the fairies. Unable to withstand the fury of the assailants the whole body fled from the field and left it in possession of the victors. The serious nature of the struggle was seen by the number of arms that lay scattered in all directions wherever the fairies had made a stand. The

Chinese were struck with the appearance of these, for they all had such a slight and unwarlike aspect, and, moreover, they were white and glistening. When they came to examine them a roar of amusement burst from the lips of every one, for it was discovered that the weapons of the beaten foe consisted of stalks of millet that, in the hands of the fairies and under their enchantment, had been able to do such valiant deeds in the battle that had just taken place.

On the morrow, the fighting was renewed by the fairies, only this time the tactics they employed took a different form from the regular system they had adopted on the previous day. On this occasion they were careful to keep whatever men they had in reserve completely out of view from Lin's forces that he had arranged with excellent military judgment in the prospect of another attack, which he fully expected. As the men looked out from their loopholes and from behind the stone walls that had been hurriedly strengthened, they could not see a single horseman nor a solitary foot-soldier amongst the trees that bounded their view. Everything was as silent as though a state of war in which men were fighting for their very lives had no existence in all this region.

All at once, as though a bolt had been hurled from the blue, there descended from the sky with the speed of a thunderbolt a man of immense size. He was fully fifteen feet in height and broad in proportion. He was a beau-ideal warrior in appearance, and quite fitted to terrify any ordinary opponent that might have the hardihood to stand up against him. In his right hand he carried an enormous two-edged sword, that he kept whirling about with the rapidity of lightning, and which flashed and gleamed in the sun as its rays fell upon its ample blade.

The leaders of the fairies had got the impression that this huge giant with a sword that no man could wield but himself would so terrify Lin's men that they would fly in dismay before him, but in this they were entirely mistaken. With a courage that had been immensely stimulated by the victory they had just obtained, they boldly stood their ground, and fiercely attacked him with all the weapons at their command. Showers of stones were hurled at him,

spears were flung with unerring precision at his huge body, and arrows were shot by men who had been trained in the use of the bow, all with such deadly effect that ere long the great flaming sword fell from the hands of this fairy Goliath, and he himself dropped lifeless to the ground.

A rush was made by a number of the besieged to the spot where this gigantic body lay, when to their utter amazement they discovered that there was nothing human about it, but that it was composed of grass, and that the sword that lay by its side was simply a huge banana leaf that by the magic power of the fairies had been changed into the mighty weapon it seemed to be.

Miscellaneous fighting went on for some considerable time without any very decided advantage on either side. Lin had increased the number of his fighting men, until his home had rather the look of a garrisoned castle than that of the dwelling place of a wealthy citizen. The fairies, too, had gathered in increasing numbers, but with all their manœuvring they had not been able to make any impression on the sturdy forces that were holding their own manfully against them.

The struggle was at length ended in a very dramatic way, and in a manner very satisfactory to both sides. One day an unusually large detachment of the fairies had assembled and were marching in battle array straight for the forces that Lin had led out to be ready to join in battle against the enemy. On this occasion Hu himself was seen leading his men, and as he drew near Lin, in a loud voice, addressed him and asked him how it was that he was showing such bitter hostility to him.

"I have never given you any cause," he said, "for the hatred you seem to cherish against me and mine. When you were a member of my household, I treated you with the greatest courtesy, and all my dealings with you were of a most friendly character. Why then should you lead your soldiers against me to endeavour to destroy me? What is it that has turned your heart against me?"

Hu seemed deeply affected by this appeal to himself, for with a wave of his hand his soldiers marched back and

disappeared behind the trees that lay beyond, whilst he himself advanced alone up to where Lin was standing in front of his men, and seizing him by the hand begged to be forgiven for his conduct towards him.

Lin, who was of a not less generous nature than Hu, and at heart was really fond of his talented opponent, led him into the house and explained to him that his objection to his marrying his daughter was not to him personally. "I should have been quite prepared," he said, "to have given her to you in marriage, had you been of the same race as myself. I always suspected, however, that you were a fairy, and that as you lived upon the mountains and led a wandering and uncertain life my daughter would not have been able to endure the hardships that such a life would have entailed upon her; so I was compelled to refuse. In order to convince you that I have no personal animosity against you and no dislike to an alliance with you, I propose now that if you have a marriageable sister I shall be most pleased to have her betrothed to my son, with whom you are fully acquainted, and whom you know to be a man of such excellent conduct that you could well entrust her happiness to him."

Hu was delighted beyond measure with this proposal, as it showed the real esteem in which he was held by Mr. Lin, and, besides, he was most anxious to be allied with so distinguished a family as Lin's was. He accordingly informed Lin that the union of the two houses that he had just suggested was one that could easily be carried out, for he had a sister in fairyland who would be a beau-ideal wife for his son. In the course of a comparatively brief conversation, all the preliminaries for the proposed marriage were discussed and agreed to, and a day was settled when the fairy bride should be brought from her distant home to become a member of Mr. Lin's family.

The arrival of this beautiful girl was the occasion of unbounded delight both to Mr. Lin and also to her distinguished brother, who afterwards turned out to be a prince amongst the fairies and was one who stood high amongst the magnates in fairyland. Everyone was charmed, not merely with the loveliness of her face, but also with her modest and unassuming

disposition, and soon every heart in her new home was bound to her by the strongest ties of love and devotion. The marriage ceremonies were on a grander scale than anyone had ever witnessed or had ever dreamt of. Even a royal princess never had such a magnificent display of beautiful robes, costly jewels, and rare wedding presents as were seen that day when the fairy bride became the wife of Mr. Lin's son. The precious gifts that had been bestowed upon her by her mysterious friends in the land of the spirits were enough of themselves to enrich her and her husband for many a long year to come. That the marriage in these circumstances was an unusually happy one need hardly be told. Long years of prosperity ensued. The young wife was so contented with her lot that she never longed to go back to the life from which she had come, and numerous descendants of hers are still to be found who claim with becoming pride that they can trace their ancestry back to her.

V.

YU KONG THE ATHLETE.

THE invisible world, in the imagination of the Chinese, is filled with all kinds of spirits that in some mysterious way have their fortunes bound up in the great human life that fills the plains and valleys and mountain sides of this vast Chinese empire.

Some of these are gentle fairies that seem only to be planning for the welfare and happiness of the Chinese race, and who have such an intense love for them that they often abandon the delights of their fairy home and marry the men that have gained their hearts, and have, for a time, cast in their lot with those who have filled their hearts with a human love. These form the poetry and the romance of the unseen world and often put a charm into the dull, grey lives that, but for these flashes from a world that imagination has created, would be filled only with shadows.

There are other spirits again that seem to be inspired with a feeling of hatred against everything that is human. They are malevolent and spiteful and seem always to be planning how they may make life intolerable. A man, for example, is laid up with a violent fever. His body is on fire with a raging heat that consumes him and every joint in his body is racked with agony. A doctor is called in and, after a time, when his medicines have proved unavailing to expel the disease, he gravely assures the friends that this complaint is no mortal one, but is the result of an evil spirit who has taken possession of the man, and that heroic measures must be taken to drive out the demon, otherwise there is no hope for the patient.

The doctor retires and a wizard is called in who proceeds to belabour the sick man with a stout bamboo stick until his body is black and blue with the strokes that have fallen upon it. The object is to terrify the demon, so as to cause it

to depart. Sometimes the man gets better, but occasionally he dies, though in the latter case no blame is laid at the door of the man who was the immediate cause of his death.

Once upon a time, in a certain city in the north of China that was famous for the number of young bloods and men of fiery mettle that it contained, there lived a young man of the name of Yu Kong. He was noted throughout the town as a wrestler with whom few would dare to compete. He was a man of great strength and he had so persistently trained himself by a severe discipline that he knew how to use it to the greatest advantage in his contests with other well-known athletes.

He had also learned the art of fencing and could wield the broad sword with a science that made him a dangerous rival for anyone to try their skill upon. He was proficient too in his knowledge of the bow and arrow and he rarely ever missed the "moon" as the centre of the target is called, in the great shooting matches, when men gathered from far and near to carry away the victor's laurels. So proficient was he in every athletic art that he entered the examination hall to compete for B.A. and came out successfully amongst the very first in the list of those who had satisfied the examiners.

The authorities in China give men their degrees not only for culture and knowledge of the classics, but also for their proficiency in all kinds of athletics. In the examinations, which are conducted by a high government official, the exercises are running, wrestling, horse-riding, putting the stone, lifting heavy weights, use of the bow, and firing of jingals. Any man who passes successfully in these is not only qualified for entering the army, but at the same time he obtains the military degree of B.A., which gives him a certain recognized status in the military world.

Yu Kong was a bold and generous-minded young fellow. His physical training had developed his muscles and put every organ into such healthy and harmonious working that he was saved from all dyspeptic ailments and could consequently take a broader and more generous view of life in general. He was, moreover, of a naturally happy-minded disposition

and more inclined to have faith in his fellowmen than to be perpetually entertaining suspicions of them. The result was that he was a most popular man with everyone who knew him, and even many who were not personally acquainted with him, when they heard his name mentioned, showed by the pleased smile that lit up their countenance that they had heard his praise sung and were inclined to think well of him.

Whilst Yu Kong was so popular with his fellowmen, it unfortunately happened that he had incurred the hatred of one of the evil spirits whose aim and purpose seems to be the infliction of pain and disaster upon mankind. His very generosity and large-heartedness had signalled him out as the very one from amongst all the crowds in that great city who ought to be doomed to destruction. His death would not merely afflict his friends and those who loved him with sorrow; it would also be the means of depriving his comrades and acquaintances of a true and steadfast friend and of thus diminishing the sum of human happiness.

In order to carry out his malevolent purposes, this gnome assumed a human form, and as an inexorable fate, that controls the actions even of the demons, would not permit him to take that of some high-minded or benevolent individual, he decided to become a fortune-teller.

This he did, and taking a small room in one of the most crowded streets in the city he gave out that he was a great wizard who had come from the wild and dreary steppes of the far north, where the spirits amidst the storms and wild commotions of nature learned the secrets that concerned the lives of men in every grade of society.

Many of these had been imparted to him, he declared, and he was now prepared to divulge them, for a consideration, to those who might consult him. He had power, he said, to look into the future and predict coming disaster; he could read the "Book of Life and Death" that was in the possession of the king of the "Land of Shadows" and tell how long each one had to live before his majesty sent his messengers to call him into his kingdom. This "Book of Life and Death" is a register that is kept by the king of the

"Land of Shadows" of every human being, and tells when each was born, and how long each one has to live.

These bold assertions made a great impression upon the town, for the Chinese are superstitious to a degree and seem to have unbounded faith in any clever, designing rogue who declares that he can penetrate the mysteries of the unseen and reveal to them secrets that have been wisely hidden from mankind.

People flocked to consult him, and, being a demon with more than human knowledge, he produced a sensation by the knowledge he seemed to have of the secrets in the lives of those who came to have their minds relieved from the many perplexities that were troubling them. Things that were supposed to be known only to the members of the family were spoken of by this wonderful wizard as though he were perfectly familiar with them. Coming troubles too were averted by his advice, and sinister influences that were about to bring calamities upon homes were averted by a single wave of his hand that seemed to bring terror into the hearts of the malign spirits that peopled the air.

In a short time he would have made his fortune, so popular had he become, but his purpose was not to gain wealth but to inflict sorrow upon the one man that he hated with an undying hatred. What, indeed, was the use of money to him? He could not carry it into the boundless air spaces where he had his home, neither could it buy him the ease of soul that in his wildest flights of power he never could induce to visit him. It was Yu Kong that he wanted within his grasp, and all the riches of the city, though they were poured into his lap, would not have been sufficient to compensate him were Yu to escape his vengeance.

At length the time arrived when it seemed as though Yu Kong were going to fall within his clutches. One day his servant was attacked with a most dangerous fever that resisted all the medicines that the Chinese doctors were wont to prescribe for such, and Yu Kong, who was of a kindly disposition and tender-hearted, felt greatly distressed at the sufferings that the man was enduring. He spared no expense in procuring the services of the most eminent doctors of the town, but their unanimous decision was that this was no

common complaint, but was due to the presence of a malign spirit that was evidently determined upon his destruction, and they all advised that he should consult the famous wizard that had taken up his abode in the town.

For some time he was unwilling to do this, as he was a man of liberal views and had not as much faith in necromancers as the common folk usually had. As the sickness of his servant, however, grew in intensity and the medical profession declared that they could do nothing for him, he decided at last that he would go and see this famous fortune-teller, who seemed from all reports to have a marvellous knowledge of what was going on in the unseen world.

The delight of the wizard when he saw Yu Kong enter his doors was unbounded and without waiting for him to tell the reason why he had sought him, he said "Oh! you have come to me about your servant who has been very ill." Yu Kong was taken aback and demanded how he knew that the man had been sick.

"Oh! that is a very simple question," he replied, "it has been no difficult matter for me to discover that. There is one thing far more important than that for you to know and that is within three days you will be a dead man."

"How do you dare to say that to me?" angrily demanded Yu Kong.

"I say it," replied the wizard, "because I have penetrated the secrets of those who have the disposal of men's lives within their hands and I know that before three days have passed you will have ceased to live. Not that you need really die after all," he continued, "for I have the power of frustrating the designs even of the great and terrible king of the 'Land of Shadows,' and if you will consent to agree to my terms, I will guarantee that no harm shall come to you, but that your life shall be prolonged to old age."

Instead of being mollified by this statement of the wizard, Yu Kong became highly incensed. "Why should I agree to make terms with you?" he said. "I am well and strong and in robust and vigorous health. You evidently want to impose upon me to satisfy your own evil purposes. You are a cheat and I defy you to do me any injury."

With these words he set off home and gathering a few choice friends together he rehearsed to them all that had happened to him with the wizard. These strongly advised him not to incur the hatred of such a powerful man, but to come to terms at once with him and thus avert the disaster that they were afraid would fall upon him.

Yu Kong absolutely refused to do this. He was a brave and high-spirited man, and, moreover, he was under the strong conviction that the fortune-teller was a rogue and that for some sinister purpose he wished to get him within his toils. He told his friends, therefore, that he was determined to fight him and that he felt convinced he would come out the conqueror.

Two days went by without any sign from the wizard. Yu Kong, however, though he was every moment on his guard felt that the critical time would be on the third day, and he accordingly made all his preparations for the struggle that he was persuaded would take place. He chose from an armourer's shop the finest and sharpest sword that was in stock. With this in his hand he sat in his room, the windows all thrown wide open, waiting for the supreme moment when the wizard would begin to use his enchantments against him.

The hours went slowly by, and midnight was near at hand, after which the peril that had been predicted would cease to threaten him. All at once as a drowsy fit was coming over him, the room was darkened with a mighty shadow and a figure of monstrous proportions and fierce and horrible aspect came with a clash and a roar into his room.

Any person of less fine metal than Yu Kong would have succumbed with terror before such a terrible apparition. It seemed, however, only to inspire his courage, and with a bound he was instantly on his feet, and with the swiftness of lightning he was slashing in all directions at the hideous figure that grinned down upon him. So rapid and so mighty were the strokes that the unsightly form that seemed to fill the room became paralyzed in its movements and a mightier lunge than usual struck it a fatal blow and it fell to the ground. On examination, Yu Kong found that the thing

he had been fighting was a paper figure of an unearthly and ghastly-looking aspect, that was enough to strike terror into the bravest heart.

He had hardly recovered his composure when the room was again invaded by a warrior-like form, spear in hand, that appeared frightful enough to have come from the lowest depths of the infernal regions. With a roar of thunder that was intended to paralyze every faculty of Yu Kong, he rushed upon him believing that an easy victory awaited him.

He little dreamed, however, of the heroic spirit that dwelt in the heart of his opponent. Every thrust of the spear was met by the gleaming sword that flashed more quickly than the deadly weapon that was aimed at his heart. His fencing powers that had been developed by years of severe training now stood him in good stead, and before many minutes had passed not only had he parried every blow, but the chance came when he thrust his steel into the body of the monster, and with a groan that shook the room it fell to the ground.

On examining its body, that descended with a crash to the floor, he found that it was a grinning ogre made of clay, through which his trusty sword had pierced to the heart and laid it low.

Yu Kong felt satisfied with the two signal victories he had obtained, for he recognized that behind these apparently harmless figures there had lain a world of infernal machinations, and that the arch conspirator had but barely escaped the most serious injury by hastily dropping the outward form that he had assumed to conceal his personality. He was convinced, however, that the battle was not yet over, and that a fiercer struggle would have to be fought before he could be delivered from the peril that threatened him.

This conviction was a true one, for before many minutes had elapsed a huge figure, with broadsword in one hand and a gigantic spear in the other, with an appalling shriek, leaped into the room. Yu Kong, instead of being terrified as most mortals would have been, only found his courage rise and the spirit of battle rush mightily through every vein in his body. He felt that the crisis of his life had now come and

it was a question of a few minutes whether he would succumb before this terrible monster, or whether he would come out conqueror in one of the greatest contests that had ever been waged with the demons of the upper air.

It was well that Yu Kong had a brave and heroic heart and that years of strenuous practice had given him such a complete control of the broadsword that he wielded. The foe was no petty master of the art, such as he had often met in the examination lists, but was one that knew every trick and turn by which an opponent was to be foiled. The very fact, however, that he had chosen to appear with a weapon in each hand was the cause of his final downfall. Yu Kong, sure of foot and with an eagle eye, anticipated every stroke that was made against him, and in one unguarded moment of his enemy he was able to thrust his sword into the body of the grim monster, which at once fell with a tremendous crash on the floor, and the great and mortal fight was at an end.

The famous fortune-teller suddenly disappeared from the town and not a vestige was ever seen of him afterwards. Persons curious to pry into the future sought in vain to find him, and strange did it appear that a man so well versed in the black art should vanish from the public gaze just at the moment when riches were to be poured into his lap. In time the story leaked out and then Yu Kong became the popular hero whose valiant deeds from that time to this have travelled down the centuries.

VI.

LI, THE MAN WITH THE IRON STAFF.

Of all the fairies that figure in the national life of the Chinese there is none that stands out more prominently or more distinctly in the public eye than Li, the Man with the Iron Staff. For more than two thousand years he has, at various intervals, come down from the "Western Heaven," where he is supposed to have his residence, and has mingled in the affairs of human life. Nearly every dynasty, in the long history of the past, has wonderful stories to tell of how, on certain occasions, he has intervened in the lives of men, with the result that in every case unusual blessings have come down upon the homes of those who have had the good fortune to come under his influence.

The primary idea that he appears to have in descending to earth is to choose out the men and the women who seem, by the noble character of their lives, to be fit to be transformed into fairies, so that they may leave the pains and sorrows of earth for the perfect enjoyment of fairyland, where such are unknown. Where this supreme object cannot be attained, he shows his approbation for those who are living virtuous lives, and whose hearts are not yet prepared for the great renunciation of life, by bestowing wealth and prosperity in such abundance that their families are enriched for many a long year to come.

The pictures that are given of Li generally represent him as a man of medium height. He is lame in one leg, and as he limps along he is assisted in his painful walk by an iron staff, upon which he leans, and which is supposed to have a special virtue in conveying blessings upon those who have gained the favourable notice of this distinguished fairy.

In order to disguise himself, he dresses in clothing such as is usually adopted by beggars, and his garments are filthy and tattered in the extreme. He might indeed have just

come out of the beggars' camp, with its unclean atmosphere still clinging about him and rendering him an object of loathing to all but those whose hearts are moved by the sight of human degradation and suffering.

On his back he has strapped a large hollow gourd that has been dried in the sun, and which seems to be a convenient receptacle for the doles of cold boiled rice and the little odds and ends of food that are given to the beggarmen as they stand whining at the door. It really, however, contains a preparation of the famous elixir of life that men in all ages have been anxious to discover, but which has hitherto eluded the keenest investigations that the most thoughtful and earnest minds have made to find out its secret.

From the earliest days of the nation's history men who desired to relieve their fellowmen of the burden of pain and death believed that a preparation that they called the elixir of life was in existence somewhere, and they had but to discover its ingredients when old age and death would be banished from the world and perpetual youth and vigour would be the lot of every human being that partook of it.

It was supposed mainly to consist of the fairy peach that grows in the Western Heaven. It takes eight thousand years for the tree to produce flowers and eight thousand more to ripen into fruit. There is a popular belief that this particular fruit prevents a man from ever getting sick or ever losing his youth.

Wherever Li finds individuals that seem proper subjects for being transformed into fairies, he begins the process of eliminating the frail and mortal elements that are in them by giving them certain doses of this immortal food. The process, however, is a long one for it has to be continued for fully five hundred years before they are fit to be transferred to the abodes of the Western Heaven. In the meanwhile a marvellous change has come over them. They can move with great rapidity from place to place. They can mount up into the air and they can live absolutely without food. Their whole nature seems to become etherealized and to be independent of the laws that govern human bodies.

But we shall now give an illustration of the kind of method that Li pursued in his benevolent attempts to alleviate the sorrows of human life.

It was at the close of the Mongol Dynasty (A.D. 1206-1368), just about the beginning of the fourteenth century, that Li appeared in the city of Shanghai, bent on trying to discover whether there was anyone in that busy centre of trade that was ready for the purifying and transforming process by which he would finally become a dweller in the Western Heaven.

The reason why the Chinese have placed their heaven in the west is doubtless because the Buddhist faith, that for long centuries exercised such a powerful influence over the religious thought of the nation, was brought into China from the West. One of the emperors of the later Han Dynasty (Ming Ti, A.D. 62) had a dream, in which it was revealed to him that if he sent messengers to the West a new religion would be discovered that would bring happiness to China. He at once selected men that he deemed suitable and gave them instructions to proceed in the direction of the setting sun, and not to return until they had brought back with them the new faith that his dream had declared to him existed there.

The men travelled on until they reached India, and when they saw the great cities of that land and the gorgeous ritual in use throughout it, they concluded that they need travel no further, for in this the Emperor Ming would find the realization of what had been revealed to him in his sleep. They accordingly returned with a number of Buddhist priests and a large collection of sacred literature for the court of their sovereign, and from that time Buddhism became one of the recognized religions of the Celestial Empire.

China, at the time when Li appeared on the scene, was in a most distressful condition. The Mongol warriors that had conquered the country were a savage, barbarous race of people that were more fitted for a nomadic life than to be the rulers of a kingdom that was so far advanced in civilization as China was, when compared with themselves. Pillage and rapine and wild forays suited better their temperament, and so

when they gained possession of a land abounding in great cities and fruitful plains that contained untold wealth, the robber passions of these untamed spirits from the steppes of Mongolia leaped up within them, and they thought only of plunder and devastation and robbery. The result was that the rule of the Mongol was a terribly oppressive one, and the story of their plunderings and exactions has come down the centuries and is repeated amongst the common people to the present day.

In order to prevent anyone having a suspicion of who he was, Li appeared in the streets of Shanghai in the disguise of a beggar. He seemed to be a man who was utterly forlorn and destitute. His hair was uncombed and straggled in wild disorder over his forehead and down the back of his head. His clothes were filthy in the extreme and had been so worn to tatters that it seemed that a strong gust of wind would scatter them as leaves before the breath of the storm. His crippled leg and his ungainly motions, as he strove with the aid of his iron staff to hobble over the rough uneven roads, seemed to add intensity to the general air of wretchedness that hung over the man.

The disguise was so complete that no one ever dreamt of supposing that he was anything but a stray member of the beggars' camp on the outskirts of the town, who had wandered into the crowded thoroughfare to excite the compassion of the kindhearted by the sight of his extreme poverty. If anyone had thought but for a moment of looking into his eyes he would have seen a flash in them that never gleamed in any mortal ones before nor since, and would have begun to suspect the genuineness of this wretched specimen of humanity, but no one did.

He seemed to be strolling along aimlessly, but his piercing gaze was narrowly scanning the faces of the people who passed before him, in order to see if there were not some one who had aspirations after a better life, upon whom he could begin the transforming process that would fit him in time to become a glorified member of the Western Heaven. Moving slowly along he came in front of a large house, where a middle-aged, benevolent-looking gentleman stood at his own door looking up and down the street.

No sooner did he catch sight of Li than a wave of compassion surged through his heart and a feeling of profound pity stirred his soul to its very depths. Little did he imagine that this was the famous fairy with the iron staff whose praises had been sung by great writers during the past centuries, and whose wonderful deeds had been the theme of many a ballad that had stirred the thought and excited the imagination of the lovers of romance throughout the empire.

He was moved with a genuine human sympathy for the wretched object who was hobbling along the street, and calling Li to him he expressed his concern that he should be in such dire distress and that, as he evidently had no home where he could live and no friends to assist him, he invited him to come and stay a few days with him promising to do all he could to make his life more bearable for a short time.

Li, who was charmed with the spirit of the man, and who saw in him a possible convert who might be developed into a fairy, gladly accepted his offer and became an inmate of his home. That the gentleman was sincere in his desire to serve the beggarman was evident from the way in which he treated him. He had every stitch of his clothes taken off him and buried, whilst garments that belonged to himself were given him in exchange. A barber was called in who washed and dressed his head and a small room was given him which was put entirely at his disposal, where he could rest and enjoy himself.

The transformation in Li was, as might have been expected, immense, and his benefactor was agreeably surprised to find that he was a man of rare intelligence who was anxious to discuss with him subjects that had been the theme of sages and great scholars in the early days of Chinese history. The great object of his guest, he found out before long, was to induce him to abandon his home and the property that belonged to him, and go with him in pursuit of a higher life that would end in his becoming immortal.

The gentleman was of a kind and generous disposition and was willing to go out of his way to assist those who were unfortunate in life, but he was not prepared for such a revolutionary movement as that. He told Li that he was

quite content with his present life. He had his wife and children and sufficient means to surround himself with most of the comforts of this world, and he had no desire to give up a certainty for what might turn out to be only a visionary and romantic dream.

Li saw that his host, whilst far ahead of the most of his fellowmen in the homely virtues, did not possess that heroic spirit that would qualify him to be a leader of men in the endeavour to emancipate them from the pains and sorrows of this world. He accordingly determined not to press the matter any further, but to go elsewhere in the search for some one who might be of a kindred spirit with himself.

He accordingly informed his host of his intention of proceeding on his begging journey, as he was not suited by temperament for a settled life such as he was enjoying now. "I had hoped," he said, "that I should have had you for a companion, and that in our travels we might be able to learn some of the secrets from the land of the fairies that would uplift our lives beyond the common lot of men and secure us from pain and sorrow. I see, however, that you are not prepared for self-denial and that you are content with your present conditions, so I must continue my travels alone.

"I want to prove to you, however, before I leave, that I am indeed most grateful to you for all the attentions you have shown me. You took me, a poor beggar, from the streets and your whole family has treated me with honour and respect. I am profoundly thankful to you for your courtesy and liberality and I would like to repay you, in some little way, so that you may understand that I do appreciate your goodness to me. I want to inform you that there is a time of peril coming to you and your home. Mongol soldiers will come to Shanghai before very long, who will ravage and plunder and leave you homeless and desolate. I would strongly advise that you make immediate preparations for departure to some safer locality, and do not return until the foreign invaders have been driven from the soil of China. This will happen before very many years have elapsed. Leave everything except what you can conveniently carry with you, but delay not, for the danger is imminent.

As I know that you will be reduced to very indigent circumstances, I wish to make you a present of my beggar's staff. Take the greatest care of it. Whatever you lose, be sure that you do not lose that, for it contains a fortune that will enrich you and your posterity for many future generations. After you return to your home again you must set up a medicine shop and the concoctions you make must all be stirred with my staff. The result will be that all your prescriptions will turn out well. Your name will become famous even in distant parts of the empire, and your medicines stirred with my staff will be the means of salvation to many a poor suffering mortal."

The next day, with mutual regrets, Li bade good-by to the family that had treated him so generously.

The man was not inclined to accept Li's suggestion about a hasty flight to another region. He thought that he was only a superior kind of beggar and could not possibly have any knowledge of future events. How could he, a man he had picked up from the streets in rags and tatters, have any minute acquaintance with the movements of the Mongol invaders? He refused to place any credence in the predictions and still continued to remain in his home.

One morning he was greatly startled with the flying rumours that disturbed the composure of the inhabitants of Shanghai. Men came flying in from the outlying districts with faces full of terror, and with stories of the barbarities that an approaching army of the Mongols were committing. Neither life nor property was safe from the brutal soldiers, who slaughtered the people without any discrimination of age or sex. He had but just time to pick up a few things that could be carried, when he and his family had to flee for their lives into another county, where some of his relatives were living.

He was very careful, however, that amongst the things that he managed to convey with him was the beggar's staff. His opinion of its former owner had greatly risen, since he began to believe that perhaps after all the iron stick that had been left as a legacy with him contained within it the fortune that was in future years to enrich him and his family.

A few years went by and the founder of the great Ming dynasty had driven the northern invaders back again into their dreary wastes and steppes, when the owner of the beggar's gift returned with his family to Shanghai. Everything that he had formerly possessed he found had disappeared. His fields, lying waste and covered with weeds and desolation, were the only things that were left of all his possessions, and these for fully another year would be practically of no value to him. He was penniless and he might have starved, only he clung to the hope that the beggar's staff, which he had preserved with the utmost care during his exile from home, would in some mysterious way bring him the fortune that his beggar guest had promised him.

Remembering that eccentric man's instructions, he at once opened a small drug shop in one of the by-streets in Shanghai. He had no capital to rent a more pretentious shop or to lay in a large stock of medicines. All that he could do was to buy half-a-dozen or so of simples that were used by the common people for bruises, sores, and cuts. His whole collection did not cost him more than a shilling, yet it was not on these that he was relying, but on the magic staff that by an alchemy of its own was going to convert these herbs that had been gathered from the hillside, and that now constituted his entire pharmacopœia, into silver dollars and ingots and finally into broad lands and magnificent houses.

For some time it seemed as though no trade was ever going to be done in that wretched, miserable-looking little shop. People passed by it with a smile of scorn upon their faces. A few dried and withered looking grasses, and a bunch or two of antiquated leaves were the only things visible to the public. The man that professed to be able to salve the wounds and bruises of a whole district with such a meagre stock as was exhibited in this out-of-the-way shop must be an adventurer with no means and no medical knowledge to entitle him to the patronage or respect of those who might need his services.

Li's staff was placed in a secure place in an inner room, ready to be used at a moment's notice, but it seemed to have

no power to attract customers, nor to influence the destiny of the man who was trusting to its unseen magic for his very existence. If things did not soon take a turn he would have to buy a beggar's wallet and, grasping the stick that had been left him as an emblem of good luck, beg his way from place to place.

At last, one day, when hope had almost fled from the man's heart, an incident took place that proved to be the turn in the tide that was to lead to fortune. A countryman, with a heavy load that he had slung on a bamboo that rested on his shoulder, slipped and fell right in front of the mean-looking drug shop. After the passers-by had helped the poor man to his feet it was found that he was suffering from a deep cut in one of his knees from which the blood was slowly oozing, and that the skin on one of his arms was badly grazed. Immediate help was needed to stanch the blood and bind up the wounds from which he was suffering.

The shopkeeper was appealed to and was asked whether he had any medicine that could give immediate relief in a case like this. With a brave face, but with a beating heart, he declared that he had a salve that he could prepare in a few seconds that would work a cure before their very eyes, for it would not only ease the pain, but it would also enable the countryman to continue his journey without experiencing any inconvenience from his fall. A smile of incredulity wreathed the broad and spacious countenances of the Celestials as the man brought out a curiously-shaped iron staff, with which he stirred the ingredients of the mixture that was to work so marvellous a cure.

Never had any concoctor of drugs been known to use such a weird and strange fantastic instrument as this and, consequently, the excitement was great as with deft and facile hand he got ready to relieve the sufferer. This, however, was small when compared with the wonder and amazement that filled every heart when the balsam was applied to the deep gash in the knee. As if by magic the gaping wound slowly but perceptibly united till only a thin and narrow ridge marked the line where the flesh had been torn. The bruise on the arm which was raw where the skin had

been abraded, no sooner felt the touch of the ointment than every trace of the accident had disappeared and a fine, healthy cuticle spread over the scar, so that, to an inexperienced eye, it would have been difficult to have told where the man had suffered from his fall.

The news of this remarkable cure spread like lightning throughout the town. Every man that was present in that narrow street that day became a herald, wherever he went, to proclaim the advent of a doctor more famous than any of the great men that had been deified in former ages, because of their skill in curing the diseases of mankind. Every time the story was told it was magnified. The teller seemed to think a reflected glory would fall upon himself the more marvellous it was and so imagination was let loose to add to the fame of the druggist.

From this time the business of the little shop in the obscure street never suffered an eclipse. Men with bruises and wounds and huge glaring ulcers, so common amongst the labouring classes, came with their ailments and found speedy relief. But it was especially in cases of rheumatism that the owner of the beggar's staff became famous, for no one could produce such ointment as he and none could ease the pains like that which had been stirred with the magic stick. In course of time the fame of this wonder-working medicine grew and orders from all parts of China came for it. Many have tried to imitate it, but the magic power of the staff is wanting, and so it remains without a rival ever since the first day it was used, when the countryman fell and wounded himself, until the present day.

The firm that was established in such small beginnings in a mere shanty kind of a shop soon moved to larger premises in one of the main thoroughfares of the town, and from that time down to the present the business has continued to be carried on.

Common rumour says that the beggar's staff is still in possession of the firm though, in consequence of constant use through two dynasties, it is now reduced to about four or five inches in length. It is felt that when it has all been used up in the mixing of the famous balsam the fame of the house

will depart and so the greatest care is taken that it shall suffer the smallest amount of friction possible, in order to prolong its existence in the hands of the firm it has benefited for more than five hundred years.

But it is now time for us to follow the fortunes of Li and see what success he achieved in the great purpose that he had in leaving the Western Heaven, to find out amongst men those who were desirous of a higher life and who aspired through centuries of strenuous and noble endeavour to be fitted for immortality.

Let us in imagination transport ourselves to the great city of Nanking. This southern capital is a famous city, and is situated on the right bank of the great river Yangtze, which from the remotest times has poured its mighty streams down to the ocean. It is a place of immense importance and men from every part of the empire are found treading its streets.

It is a centre of refinement and learning too, for here the triennial examinations are held, and degrees conferred upon the successful competitors for literary honours. It is, moreover, the seat of the Provincial Government, and great mandarins and thousands of smaller officials, some in office and others waiting expectantly for some position to be conferred upon them, are seen jostling with the crowds, and in their official and semi-official robes presenting a marked contrast between the common people and what may be called the aristocracy.

As we are moving along one of the great thoroughfares, through which the crowd passes and repasses the livelong day, we notice that its sides are more or less lined with hucksters and peddlers and miscellaneous caterers for the weary travellers that, but for them, might suffer seriously from the pangs of hunger. Conspicuous amongst them all was one who seemed to be most popular, for quite a number had gathered round his stall and were partaking of the delicacies that he had prepared for sale. These consisted of small flour balls, boiled in highly sweetened water, that not only made them soft and tender but also gave them a delicate aroma of the sugar in which they were cooked, and that rendered them particularly appetizing to those who indulged in them.

There was one very curious feature about this culinary establishment that was different from any other that existed on this great thoroughfare. The owner of it was a common-looking man, evidently of the lower class, for his clothes were such as only the very poorest wore, and were put on in the slovenly, untidy way in which the labouring people invariably dress themselves. His hair too was uncombed, and stray locks tossed about at the bidding of every gust of wind. But the most remarkable feature about him was that he was blind and had to trust to the conscience of his customers whether they paid him rightly for the balls that each one consumed.

Every one seemed to have the very highest appreciation of them and declared that none such had ever been made in Nanking by any peddler or shopkeeper that had offered such for sale. They were astonished they said that a blind man should be able to make such exquisite balls, that tasted as though they had been made by the gods and tempted men to indulge in them beyond their means.

The peddler refused to take any merit for their manufacture, for he declared that they had been made by his wife, who had a deft and nimble hand, and a knack for making them such as few women possessed. He was glad, he said, that they appreciated his goods and he hoped they would be fair to him and pay him a cash apiece for each one they consumed. He had to leave this point to their honour, he continued, for he could not see how many each took and so he would accept the word of each and be content with the cash that the purchasers gave him.

The seller of sweetmeats was not really an indigent peddler who was gaining his living by their sale, but the fairy Li, who had assumed this occupation and this disguise in order to test the motives and the passions of men's hearts. He wanted to discover, amongst the crowds of men that passed in human sight, and whose motives were hidden from human ken behind their sphinx-like faces, whether there were not some who might have concealed within the recesses of their hearts passionate desires for a higher life, and who longed for some way that might emancipate them from the

thraldom in which they were held by their environments. In order to be sure of their motives he wished to observe them from a situation where they would never suspect they were being watched, and where they would not therefore have any possible motive in concealing their true selves from him.

Li was very large and broad in his sympathies, and was not inclined to look for men with profound aspirations after goodness simply amongst the higher classes of society. He recognized that amongst the poorest and lowest of mankind there were men oppressed by their surroundings whose eyes were upon the heavens and whose hearts were filled with an unutterable longing for a perfect deliverance from evil, and for the possession of a life that should have no death in it.

The people that gathered round to indulge in Li's savoury balls thought he was blind, but through his apparently sightless eyeballs he could see everything that was going on, and he was often pained at the want of principle and the lack of honesty that they all exhibited. Some would take half-a-dozen balls and pay him for three, whilst others would vary in a larger or a smaller degree, but not one would give the correct number when he was handing in payment. This was considered by every one of them to be a most excellent joke, for Li accepted every man's word as true, and never attempted to discuss the question as to whether he was being wronged or not.

This went on for several days and the fairy's heart sank within him as he saw that, amidst the crowds that gathered round his stall attracted by the high quality of his balls and the ease with which they might be obtained without even paying for them, there was not a single one who had a nature that was aspiring after anything better than what the present life could give him.

At length, one day, a scholarly man drew near that had such a distinct personality that Li found himself in some way he could not explain attracted towards him. He seemed to be between fifty and sixty years of age. His face was a good one and marked with thought. It had a benevolent air too, as though his heart was filled with kindly feelings towards his fellowmen.

Li marked how he selected a number of balls out of the seething cauldron where they were being kept hot, and he waited with intense anxiety to watch whether he had a conscience that was superior to those that had been cheating him so recklessly for the last few days. When he rose from the bench on which he had been seated and came to reckon with him for the balls he had eaten he found that the sum he put into his hand was right to a cash.

Addressing the rest of his customers, Li said, "I wish to have a conversation with this gentleman and so I shall be compelled to leave you for a short time. Keep your reckoning yourselves, and put the cash you owe me in this drawer, and I can get them by and by when I return."

He then, to the intense amusement of every one, who saw now a chance of having to pay nothing for their balls, followed after the receding scholar who was proceeding along the great road towards the city. Catching him up, they soon became absorbed in the great subjects that had brought Li down from the Western Heaven to earth, and finally the scholar invited him to accompany him home and stay with him as his guest.

Li found him to be a man of a profoundly kindred spirit, who had for many a year longed for immortality, but who had never yet been able to discover the way that led to the land where the immortals live. In a short time Li disappeared and at the same time the scholar vanished from his home, and no traces of him could ever be discovered by his sorrowing family or relatives. And thus Li of the Iron Staff made one conquest at least in his self-denying missionary labours to save men from the ills of life. How and what were the adventures he met in this self-denying effort of his can easily be discovered in the stories that have been recorded in the books that have been written about this famous and well-known character.

VII.

WONG SING; OR, HOW THE FORTUNES OF A ROYAL FAMILY WERE RESTORED BY A FAIRY.

THE fairies are a race of people that never lose their interest in man. Elevated by noble deeds and lives of self-denial, they have reached the happy place in the Western Heaven where the pains and sorrows of life from which they have emerged never cast their shadows upon them. What their occupations are, the world has only the mistiest and the vaguest ideas, though those who have been permitted to get a glimpse of some of the homes they have made for themselves on earth, when carrying on some benevolent purpose for men, tell us that their lives are spent very much as would those of any wealthy family be. They also declare that their delights and amusements are very much after the type of those whose means enable them to surround themselves with the luxuries that only the well-to-do could afford.

One of the most famous dynasties of China had passed away amid the crash of revolution, and most of the members of the royal family had suffered death during the time of the anarchy or subsequently by the orders of the new rulers, who did not feel themselves safe so long as they knew that a single member of the fallen house existed to call in question their right to the throne in the future.

It was only by changing their name and by hiding themselves in obscurity that any single member of the royal clan escaped extermination. It was known to the fairies that one descendant at least had managed to evade the general massacre, and as his branch of the family had been distinguished for their generosity and their love to their fellowmen, it was decided that all their influence and power should be employed to rescue him from the poverty and

wretchedness that the misfortunes of his House had thrust upon him.

This man's name was was Wong Sing and no one that saw him would ever have dreamt that he was of royal ancestry. The necessity for concealment had so worked upon his spirits that he did not dare to enter into any business that would bring him in any way prominently before the public. He had hidden himself, therefore, in an obscure village where the life and bustle of the outside world were absolutely unknown, and all ambition to rise out of his miserable surroundings seemed to have been crushed out of his heart. Unfortunately he was not a man with a strong character, and he had married a thriftless, common-place wife, who helped to drag him down and prevent him from ever dreaming that there was any place for him in life higher than the one he now occupied.

His home was a little shanty by the roadside, and as is invariably the case with the very poor in China, it was the very picture of discomfort and despair. The furniture was of the poorest and the cheapest kind that could be bought, but the most distressing feature about this wretched home was the dust and dirt that lay on everything in it. Cobwebs, spun by great bloated spiders that blinked from smoke-dyed rafters above, hung in tatters in the air, and waved and tossed with every sudden gust of wind that with a mad spirit of fun flashed in at the open door.

There was a grimy feeling in the air, for dust had invaded the home and had taken possession of every nook and corner in it. The utterly untidy look and the dishevelled hair and the thread-bare clothes of his wife as she moved about the house, seemed to be absolutely in harmony with the grimy, unlovely aspect of his miserable home. But the time had come at last when the fortunes of this fallen family were to be restored, and if not with the old regal splendour, at least with a magnificence that Wong Sing never had dreamed of in his happiest moments of any inspiration that may have stirred the depths of his heart.

One day, as he wandered about in his usual listless way, with the grey shadows of his life resting upon him, he saw

gleaming in the long grass a long golden hairpin such as wealthy women use as ornaments for their hair. Picking it up he discovered that it was of rare and beautiful workmanship, and strange to say had the royal arms of his dynasty engraven upon it. This was a mystery to him. However could such a relic of a mighty house have got into this obscure village, where the wives and daughters of the farmers could only afford to buy the cheapest hairpins with which to keep their long black tresses from falling in disorder down their shoulders. Full of perplexity, he put the precious relic in his breast pocket and walked slowly on, trying to think out how such an extraordinary event could have happened as that which had just taken place.

All at once his thoughts were diverted by the appearance of an elderly lady coming along the pathway towards him. She had an exceedingly striking appearance, so much so that he felt himself powerfully attracted towards her. Her eyes were black and piercing and had such an intelligent look about them that they at once commanded the attention of Wong Sing. Although her dress was very plain, there was a dignity about her carriage and the pose of her figure that made her seem as though she belonged to some aristocratic home, and that by some strange accident or other she had lost her road and was wandering about in this unfrequented and out-of-the-way village.

As she drew near to Wong Sing, she addressed him in a very courteous, lady-like manner, and told him that she was in considerable trouble as she had unfortunately lost a very valuable hairpin that she had dropped on the road somewhere in the neighbourhood of where they were standing.

"May I ask whether you have seen anything of it?" she asked Wong looking at him with those bright eyes of hers as though they would pierce his very soul.

"Oh! yes," he replied, "I presume I have the very one you have lost," and, putting his hand into the pocket where he had placed it, he drew forth the hairpin and handed it to her.

"You are indeed an honest man," she cried, "and I thank you with all my heart for restoring to me something that I

highly cherish not simply because of its intrinsic value, but also because of the tender associations connected with it."

"May I ask," said Wong, "how it is that you happen to have a gold ornament in your possession that has engraven upon it the royal arms of the dynasty that used to reign over China?"

"Oh! I can easily explain that," she said, and her eyes flashed and a look of pride overspread her countenance. "This hairpin originally belonged to my husband, who was a descendant of that Royal House, and years ago when we were married he gave it to me as a wedding gift. He has now been dead for many years, but I still remember his love for me, and I felt exceedingly distressed to-day when I found I had lost his present to me, and of course I am very grateful to you for restoring it to me."

"It appears to me," said Wong, "that you and I are relatives, for I too am a descendant of the Royal Family to which you say your husband belonged. I would like exceedingly to ask you to come with me to my home, but I know that I could not entertain you as you deserve. The house is so wretched and uncleanly, and we are so exceedingly poor that I fear you would turn away in disgust from us because of our forlorn and miserable circumstances."

"Oh! you must not say that," the lady quickly replied; "that you have fallen into poverty is not a thing to be ashamed of, for I know by your conduct to-day that you are still an honourable man. I am determined now that I have discovered a relative not to lose sight of him, and besides who knows but that I may be able to give you such advice and assistance as may be of service in lifting you out of the position into which you, the heir of kings, has unfortunately descended!"

When they reached Wong's house, the lady seemed shocked at the sight that met her gaze. It was not simply that she saw signs of extreme poverty such as marked the lowest ebb to which any family could fall. She perceived something that was to her infinitely more distressing, and that was the untidy, slovenly and absolutely neglected air that reigned throughout the house. Mrs. Wong might have

been a beggar woman just recently imported from the nearest beggar camp. Her face was grimy with accumulated dirt, her hair unkempt, and her clothes, untouched by water for many a long day, were worn and patched and repatched until but a shadow of the original cloth lingered amidst the various bits that held the vanishing dress from entirely disappearing.

In China the professional beggars constitute a separate class by themselves. Some open space on the outskirts of a town is selected where their encampment is pitched. This land is usually the burying ground for the poor in the city, who have not the means to purchase a piece of ground in which to bury their dead. Here the beggars may live without any fear of ejectment, for there are no owners to claim rent or to drive them away when they wish to resume possession.

They build their miserable little shanties in the vacant spots amongst the graves, and more wretched homes than these are it would be impossible to conceive. The common people in China are most untidy and uncleanly in their habits, but it is reserved for the beggar fraternity to show in what squalid and loathsome conditions human beings may live and seem to a certain extent to enjoy life.

In the country-places, where the beggars are fewer and more scattered, they still constitute a community that is entirely separate from the rest of their fellowmen. They most commonly annex a comparatively deserted heathen temple, and if there is no opposition from the village to which it belongs, all the beggars within a certain radius may be seen wending their way across the fields and along the narrow pathways in the twilight towards this common centre that they have selected as their home.

A beggar in China can never be mistaken. He carries his hall-mark upon him. Such a thing as a respectably-dressed mendicant does not exist in the Empire. Their lot is a desperately degraded one, with discomforts and sorrows that would seem to make life intolerable, and yet, with the easy-going nature of the Chinese, and in spite of their rags and sores and damp and filthy huts, they seem to be able to

turn the edge of life's ills and to rise above the despair that they would seem inevitably to bring with them.

The person of Mrs. Wong, with the look of a beggar woman upon her, was a symbol of the home, and as the lady looked at her, and on the walls blackened with dirt, and at the thick layers of dust that had eaten their way into everything on which they rested, a feeling of despair seemed to creep over her heart, as though the task she had set before her was a hopeless one.

She was determined, however, that Mrs. Wong should never know anything of her thoughts, so with eyes dancing with pleasure and with a smile upon her face that seemed to fill the room as though sunbeams had flashed through it, she said, "Do you know that I have just discovered from your husband that we are relatives, and that we all belong to the same Royal House that once ruled China, and that if we had our rights you would not be living in this poor home, but would be grandees of the Empire and housed in a palace in the Capital? I am so delighted that I have been able to meet with those who are so near akin to me, and, in order that we may get to know each other well, I propose that I shall come and live with you and get thoroughly acquainted with you."

Mrs. Wong gazed with wonder and amazement upon the lady who thus addressed her. She did not know what to make of her. That she was far superior in rank to herself or anyone in the neighbourhood was evident from the natural dignity and grace with which she bore herself. There was also an elegance of manner about her that showed that she had been accustomed to mingle in refined society. That she should condescend even to visit them in a home so poor and squalid was a marvel, but that she should propose to take up her abode with them and actually live in these mean and humble surroundings was something too much for her to believe.

As she stood with a dazed and perplexed look upon her countenance, the lady, who had a grace and charm of manner that won the heart of Mrs. Wong, began to suggest that various improvements might be made in the home that would render it more pleasant and attractive. As she said that

extreme poverty was the main cause for the forlorn condition of the family, she gave Wong some money and directed him to go out at once and buy certain articles that were essential for immediate use. Then with a broom in hand she attacked the accumulations of dust and refuse that had lain undisturbed about the floor and on the furniture with such vigour that Mrs. Wong became inspired with her spirit and wielded the feather-duster with such effect that ere long the rooms, though they still had an air of destitution about them, presented a clean and cheerful look such as they had never had since the day when they left the builders' hands.

The universal duster in the homes of the Chinese is the one that is made of feathers. The business of making these is a special one by itself. When a chicken is killed its feathers are carefully preserved and sold for a few cash to the rag and bone man who makes his daily round amongst his regular customers. The collections of each day are carried by all these itinerant traders to some shop in the nearest town, where feathers are sorted and sunned and made to look as natural as though they were on the backs of the fowls from which they were once rudely plucked. They are then deftly fixed on lengths of rattan, about three feet long and are sold to housewives for service in their homes, for about a penny to twopence apiece.

The fairy, for such the strange lady was, soon worked such wonders in the home that it could hardly be recognized. A regular campaign of cleanliness was organized. The walls were whitewashed and made as white as lime could make them. The cobweb streamers that had hung fluttering from the rafters had disappeared and so too had the huge spiders that had spun them. The grimy look that the dust-laden air and the indolent slatternly ways of Mrs. Wong had given to everything in the home had entirely vanished and now there was a sense of freshness and purity, as though one were on a mountain top and the fresh breezes of heaven were blowing around one.

But the most remarkable change was in Mrs. Wong. The old rags in which she had been content to be clothed had been discarded, and dresses of the very latest fashion

and of the very best materials that the shops contained had been got for her by the mysterious stranger, who seemed to have an unlimited supply of money at her command.

With the clean and healthy surroundings and white walls that showed not a speck of dirt upon them, and her own person dressed in clothes that made her feel as though she were living in fairy-land, there gradually came back the sense of womanhood that had been lost in her.

The fairy, with her delicate and refined sense of what was highest and best in woman, knew that until she had touched and developed this in Mrs. Wong her efforts to raise the family ideal would be attended with no success. She, accordingly, did everything in her power to make the dawning self-respect, that was touching her life with a new ambition, one of the forces that would lift her up from the mean and wretched condition into which she had fallen.

The most exquisite little bits of jewellery would find their way, in some mysterious manner that utterly perplexed Mrs. Wong, into her bedroom. Hairpins enamelled with the delicate blue feathers of the kingfisher that had once skimmed along the rivers and up and down the banks of the streams in the land where the fairies have their home, earrings of rare and ingenious workmanship, and bracelets made of jadestone in hues that no one had ever seen before, would appear in her dressing case, without any apparent reason, when she opened it in the morning to perform her toilette. In time she became so changed a character that it would have been impossible to have recognized in the refined and well-dressed lady, the wretched miserable-looking woman whom the fairy had found in such a degraded condition when she came from fairyland on her errand of mercy.

The kingfisher is a favourite bird with the Chinese, and its bright blue feathers, that give it such a gay and charming look as it flies by the water's edge or down amongst the sedges, are utilized by the jewellers in their manufacture of the ornamental pins that the women use in such profusion in their hair. The blue is of an exquisite colour and acts as a charming foil to the dark complexion and to the heavy black tresses of the women of this land.

But it was not simply with Mrs. Wong that this fairy with the beautiful spirit had a difficulty in changing and transforming the character. Her husband, in some respects, was even a more difficult problem to solve than his wife. His many years of indolence had eaten into his very soul and had taken all ambition out of him. The slovenly, uncleanly habits, so natural to the lower classes in China, had left their mark upon him, and he had no desire to rise to a high position in the future. He was stubborn and obstinate and therefore the fairy had to be extremely cautious in her endeavours to arouse a manly, independent spirit within him.

By degrees she got him interested in making money, and supplied him with funds to start several little ventures, and though they were failures because of his want of enterprise, they had the effect of developing within him a more ambitious view of life, that made him desirous of rising out of the mean position that he occupied in the poor and insignificant village in whichhe lived.

At length the fairy saw that the time had at last arrived when it was safe for her to put into operation a scheme that she had devised for the making of his fortune. At that particular time there was a perfect craze among nearly all classes for quail fighting. The quail, it may be explained, is a timid, delicate-looking bird, and one would never dream that so shy-looking a little thing would have the fighting element so strongly within so frail and feeble-looking a body as it possesses. But so it is, and the Chinese indulge their gambling propensities by making them fight each other and by betting on them.

The way they get them to fight is very curious. They place two birds opposite to each other and drop a grain of rice between them. This seems to arouse the bitterest hostility in the breasts of them both, for each one wants to get that grain for himself. Leaving the cause of offence for the moment, they furiously attack each other as though they were fighting cocks and they continue the contest until one becomes the victor, when the other runs away and can never under any circumstances be induced to fight again. It makes but one real fight during the whole of its life.

Apart from its qualities as a fighter, the Chinese are fond of the quail as a pet, and they may be seen with one held in the grasp of the hand, whilst the timid little thing seems to repose with perfect contentment and without any attempt to get away from the grip of its owner. Quail fighting was one of the ways in which the gambling passion that is deeply rooted in the heart of the Chinese could find a vent. It was inexpensive, moreover, for quails are cheap and even the poorest could afford to pay the money that one would cost in the market.

Rumour had brought the report to the village where Wong lived that a certain Prince of the Blood had got a collection of quails that were famous for their fighting powers, and that they had managed to defeat every bird that had been brought into the arena against them. So sure, indeed, was he of their prowess, that he had issued challenges to all those who possessed quails and invited them to come to the palace and try issues with his famous fighters.

This was precisely the chance the fairy desired. Coming in one morning with a graceful, delicate looking quail in her hand, she informed Mr. Wong that she was going to make him a present of it, and she advised him to proceed at once to the Capital that lay a few miles away and try his fortune against the birds that belonged to the Prince.

"There is no quail in all China," she said, "that can beat this one. It is a modest-looking little thing, and does not seem to have much fighting power in it, but it is bound to beat every rival that dares to stand up before it, and it is going to bring you great good fortune. I have given it the name 'Pearl,' so now you can start with it as soon as you like for the Capital, where it will secure you both honour and the beginning of great wealth."

Full of a new ambition that now stirred his soul, Mr. Wong reached the city and found that the one subject of conversation wherever he went was the great quail tournament that was expected to take place on the morrow. The Prince had once more sent his challenges abroad and invited quail holders to appear and contest for the mastery with the famous birds that he possessed.

A vast concourse was assembled in the grounds where the tournament was to take place, and men from many districts were there with their favourite birds, each one anxious to carry off the palm of victory and to secure the honour and the renown that would come to the one that remained the victor in the great contest that was about to be fought.

The Prince, with a magnificent retinue, arrived with but two of his most famous quails. He was so sure that these would be certain to defeat any birds that might be brought forward that he did not think it necessary to bring a large number.

The first that he put into the enclosure where the fighting was to take place was a beautiful quail named "Summer Dawn." One after another of the birds were put in to fight with this, but after a more or less prolonged struggle every quail fled in dismay into any corner where it could crouch and hide itself, whilst "Summer Dawn" remained the acknowledged master of the field.

All this time Mr. Wong had been filled with doubt and uncertainty, and was wondering within himself whether the bird that he held in his hand, and whose timid-looking eyes seemed to be looking up to him would be able to stand up against birds that had been trained to fight, and whose confidence had been gained by victory in many a well-fought contest.

Just then the voice of the Prince was heard calling upon any one who wished to be a competitor to come forward without delay. His bird had beaten every other one that had been pitted against it and the lists would be closed unless another entry was speedily made.

With a hurried, impetuous movement Mr. Wong stepped forward and placed his timid little "Pearl" within the enclosure, right in front of the victorious "Summer Dawn," and standing aside he watched with beating heart to see what would be the result of this, to him, most momentous contest. The fairy had told him that his fortunes were to be made to-day, and that wealth and honours would pour into his home from the victory that "Pearl" would achieve for him in this great tournament.

Every one shrugged his shoulders at the sight of "Pearl" and numerous were the prophecies that it would soon share the fate of the other quails that had fled before the prowess of "Summer Dawn." No sooner, however, had it got into a fighting attitude than its whole demeanour seemed to undergo a marvellous change. A fire flashed through the dove-like eyes that showed that a warrior spirit burned within its breast, and the manful way in which it stood up to "Summer Dawn" and resisted every assault that was made upon it showed that it was not going to be defeated without a struggle. Attack and counter-attack were made in rapid succession and the crowd became excited and even the Prince began to have a fear that his famous fighting bird had at last fairly met its match. The fighting went on for about a quarter of an hour when "Summer Dawn" fled from the contest and "Pearl" stood triumphant in the ring alone.

The Prince was distressed at the disgrace that had come upon his bird, but he was determined that the honours of the day should not be carried off by an unknown stranger that no one had ever heard of before until that day. He accordingly brought forward the other quail that he had in reserve, and which because of its great strength he had named "Ironbeak."

It was indeed a powerful looking bird for it was larger in the body and longer in the legs than the ordinary run of quails, and as it stood towering over "Pearl" it suggested the idea of a crane to many of those that looked upon the two birds. As to which would be the victor there was no question in the minds of the excited crowd that waited with breathless attention to watch the great battle that was now going to be fought. That "Pearl" would never be able to withstand the onslaughts of "Ironbeak" was the almost unanimous conviction of those who were present.

The fight began with a great deal of cautious sparring on both sides. "Ironbeak" would have rushed matters, but the steady way in which "Pearl" met every manœuvre to put him at a disadvantage seemed to make him more careful in his tactics. If "Pearl" was smaller in body, he was certainly not inferior to him in courage or in the spirit with which he met every attack that was made upon him.

For a whole hour the momentous struggle went on. There were times when "Pearl," overborne by the heavier weight of his antagonist, seemed as though he would be compelled to flee, but each time, with as brave a front as ever, he stood facing "Ironbeak," and with an unsubdued mien he received his blows and paid them back again with interest. The contest seemed as if it would never end excepting with the death of these two brave fighters, when, after one brief and furious struggle more severe than any that had taken place before, "Ironbeak" was seen to fly and "Pearl" was left the acknowledged victor in this famous tournament.

Mr. Wong now became the hero of the moment, for men crowded round him to see the wonderful bird that once more lay nestling in the grip of his right hand. He was about to leave for his lodgings when he was stopped by the Prince, who besought him to sell it to him. At first he refused but a final offer of a sum equal to about two hundred pounds induced him to consent, and in a moment he became a comparatively rich man.

"Pearl" after all had brought him wealth, for with the money he had received for it he entered into business which succeeded so well that in time he became possessed of considerable property.

One day the lady who had worked such a transformation in the home told Mrs. Wong that she felt that the time had come when she must leave her. "You do not need my help any longer. Your home is a prosperous one and you are surrounded with everything that your heart can desire." Mrs. Wong was distressed when she heard this, and she used every argument she could think of to induce her to reconsider the matter and still remain with them a loved and honoured friend, but she would make no promise in the matter.

Next day when the family rose, no trace of her could be found and they never saw her face again. She had completely vanished. Up to this time they had never suspected that she was a fairy. They had often marvelled at her wonderful powers of mind and the ability she displayed in any of the common affairs of life.

They had been greatly struck, too, with her high-toned morality and with the lofty ideals that she believed every man should set before him. The perfectly miraculous change, moreover, that she had effected in their family came as a crowning reason that she must have possessed supernatural powers, and that, therefore, she was a fairy that with a benign intention had come into their lives to restore the fallen fortunes of their home.

VIII.

THE STIRRING ADVENTURES OF THE SCHOLAR WANG.

THE province of Hunan is one of the famous ones of the Empire. The two words mean South of the Lake, that is, the Tungting Lake, because its territories stretch along the southern edge of this famous sheet of water and down further south. Its people are rude and independent, and have a turbulent and boisterous way with them that is very offensive to strangers. They profess to be the fighting people of the Empire and to be afraid of no other soldiers that can be brought into the field against them.

Men from this province are drafted into regiments all over the country, and their reputation for fearlessness and for daring has given them a position that no one dares to dispute. Until within the last ten years or so, Englishmen travelling amongst them have been subjected to the greatest annoyances and insults, and happy did they consider themselves when they emerged into the neighbouring provinces where the people are of a less rabid and sanguinary character.

In a certain city in this province there lived a scholar of the name of Wang. He was exceedingly clever, and in all the literary examinations in which he had competed he had shown himself to be a man of brilliant parts, for he had usually come out first amongst the thousands that entered the examination cells at the same time that he did. True to the character of the men of the province, he was masterful and imperious in his treatment of his fellow men. He could brook no reproof, and if any one dared to oppose him he would break out into the wildest passion and use the most abominable language towards the person who thus had the hardihood to speak his mind to him.

These Examination Halls are the ideal places where fame and honour are to be obtained, and to them crowd the

men of ambition, the geniuses, and the men of meagre ability, each one hoping that fate will be kind to him and give him the degree that will lift him up from poverty, it may be, and set him amongst the rulers of the State.

They are to be found only in the provincial and prefectural cities and will often contain as many as five thousand cells, each one with a stool and a narrow desk, just wide enough to allow space for the examined. After all have entered the building for the purpose of examination the doors are closed and no one is allowed to pass out for three days, until the examinations are over. Should a man get ill and die, the rule against opening the doors is still adhered to, and a special opening in the wall has to be made through which the corpse is thrust.

The sufferings that the men endure during this enforced seclusion, and especially of weakly ones, are very great. They can only snatch sleep by laying their heads down on their desks. They have to eat the cakes or dried food that they bring in with them, for no arrangements are provided for cooking. The sanitary condition of the huge hall is something too awful to be mentioned and could only be tolerated by men whose sense of smell has been constantly degenerating, or deadened by the hoary-headed smells amidst which the people live most of their lives. That more do not die during the three days of imprisonment is due entirely to the great law of the survival of the fittest, which severely weeds out the frail and the sickly ones, and leaves the sturdiest to carry on the battle of life.

One day, as Wang was sauntering along in the suburbs of the town, he met a man that proved to be a Taoist priest. He was really a fairy, but he had taken this particular form in which to disguise himself. No sooner did he see Wang than without any ceremony he came up to him and addressing him in a brusque and off-hand manner, he said, "You have a very fine gentlemanly appearance, but you have no sense of propriety and you never know how to treat people with the respect that is due to them. You are also a man of a powerful intellect and you have abilities far beyond the average, but you are so abominably conceited and have such

a high opinion of yourself, that men who know you intimately have the most profound contempt for you. I want to tell you a secret that you seem to have lost and that is, you were once a fairy, but even in heaven you were so disgustingly proud that you were expelled from it, and reduced to the condition of a mere man. I can tell you further that you will have to go through ages of self-denial and suffering before you can travel back to the happiness of the Western Heaven, and be once more admitted to the company of the immortals that live there."

Wang was taken aback at the almost insolent manner of the priest, but there was something about him that prevented him from indulging in the violent passion that would have been evoked if any one else had dared to address him as this stranger had done. Pretending not to notice the insulting way in which he had been spoken to, he replied, "You know very well that there are no such things as fairies, and that they exist only in the imagination of the credulous and the uneducated. I appeal to you," he said, "whether you have ever seen one of those mysterious beings, or have ever met with any one who has actually come to such close acquaintanceship with one that he could verily aver that what he saw was not a delusion but a real living fairy?"

The priest, looking upon him with an amused smile, said, "If you are willing to come with me, I will let you see quite a number of fairies, so large, indeed, that you will never doubt again as to their existence, and you shall live with them long enough to know that they are not mere creations of the fancy, but real living beings just as beautiful in life and character as the popular belief has declared them to be."

Still sceptical, but moved by the evident faith of the priest in the existence of fairies, Wang replied, "Very good, let me have but sufficient evidence of the truth of what you assert, and then I shall become a convert to your opinions, but in the meantime I prefer to have my own thoughts in the matter, which are decidedly not the same as yours."

"Well, come with me," the priest said, "and I will soon disperse all your doubts," and putting forth the stick that he had his hand, he asked him to get astride of it. "Shut your

eyes now," he commanded, "and for your very life's sake do not dare to open them until I give you permission." At the word "Ascend," Wang found himself rising with incredible swiftness from the earth. The stick that he bestrode he found had grown to such dimensions that he could sit on it with perfect ease as though he had been on horseback. Putting his hands down to feel what kind of an animal he was riding on, he realized by the scales that met his touch that he was sitting on the back of a dragon.

He knew now that he must be in the hands of a great wizard who had power to perform the most wonderful miracles. A man that could command the services of the mysterious dragon to carry out his behests must be one with unlimited resources at his disposal, since the very spirits that all men stand in awe of were compelled to perform the most menial services that he required from them. Swifter than the swiftest arrow that ever flew from the full-drawn bow, Wang darted through the air. At one time he felt himself passing through clouds that seemed to eclipse the sun and to fill the air with darkness, and then emerging into the dazzling light he felt himself instinctively putting up his hands to shade his closed eyes from the brilliance that shone upon them. Onward he sped with amazing swiftness far away up beyond the sounds of earth, through the mysterious tracts where no human footsteps had ever trodden, and where the wing of the eagle in its highest flight had never carried the monarch of the air.

By and by Wang become conscious that he was not alone, and that the superior force of the man, whom at first he had deemed to be but a common Taoist priest upon whom he had looked down with the semi-contempt with which such men were usually regarded, was really controlling and directing the movements of the dragon he was bestriding. This in some degree gave him confidence. For some time after they had started on their adventurous flight, he had been filled with a nervous dread lest he should find himself being flung headlong into the mighty abyss below, where he would be dashed into a thousand pieces. After a time a feeling of exhilaration took possession of him and fear of death seemed

to vanish from his heart. Instead, there surged through him a spirit of adventure, that would have led him, had he had full control of himself and his movements, into madder and more dangerous excursions than the wildest flights of imagination that ever coursed through the human brain could have suggested to him.

Suddenly, whilst entranced with the new sensations that were now filling his heart, the voice of the priest was heard exclaiming, "We have arrived," and in an instant the dragon, as though it had been shot, fell like a meteor from the sky, and Wang in a few seconds, with his heart in his mouth, found himself in an instant once more on *terra firma*. Opening his eyes he saw that he was standing in front of a magnificent palace the like of which he had never seen before. It seemed to be built of rubies and sapphires, and all manner of precious stones, and as the sun shone upon them they reflected back his glory in all the colours of the rainbow, but in such harmony and beautiful proportion that the eyes seemed to be rested as they gazed upon the marvellous sight of this wondrous building.

Wang found to his astonishment that the dragon had vanished, and that the priest had discarded the peculiar dress of his class and was dressed in the richest garments, such as no king or royal prince on earth had ever donned. Leading the way he led Wang into the spacious grounds that surrounded the palace, and here fresh wonders filled his mind with the utmost astonishment and delight. The gardens were laid out with the most exquisite taste and abounded in flowers whose fragrance and beauty far excelled anything that he had ever seen or heard of. They were adapted, moreover, for giving the very highest enjoyment. Summer-houses garlanded with trailing vines, cosy corners where a perfect retreat could be obtained, and green sward where the fairies could dance in the moonlight, were some of the charming features that he caught a glimpse of as they slowly wended their way to the mansion that glittered in the distance and seemed like a beautiful gem set in a frame that appeared to be aiming at eclipsing the splendour of the thing it was meant to show off.

At last, after many a winding and turning, where all sense of weariness was lost in the delights that came from unexpected beauties that flashed upon them from these fairy grounds, they reached the building towards which they had been walking for more than an hour. Here they were met by an old man of a most venerable and pleasing aspect. He seemed to Wang to personify the conception that painters had delighted to conceive as the beau-ideal image of the typical fairy, that with a benevolent heart and a face full of tenderness was accustomed to mingle in human life for the purpose of alleviating the sorrows of mankind.

He greeted Wang's companion with the most effusive delight and it soon became evident from their conversation that these two were fairies who stood high in this magic world, and had attained to an eminence that showed what exalted beings they were. Seeing Wang in the ex-priest's company, though simply a mere mortal, the old man seemed to put himself out to show him honour and respect, and invited him in the most courteous manner to come in and be seated, assuring Wang that he would be delighted to have him as his guest as long as it was his pleasure to remain with him.

They passed through great halls, decorated by an art so beautiful and so subtle that every sense seemed to be charmed as the eye rested upon the wonderful creations of fancy and of genius that had turned them into veritable halls of delight. Everything that could minister to the intellect and to the imagination had been collected and arranged with an idea to produce the highest effect upon the mind of the beholder.

Passing through a magnificent suite of rooms, they at last came to one that was evidently considered the living room, and here the old gentleman introduced Wang to his two daughters, who were evidently awaiting their arrival. They were both of them exceedingly beautiful women and of that graceful type of form and face that has always been associated in the minds of mortals in all lands with the typical fairy. One of these was named "Phœnix Clouds," and she was so exquisitely lovely and had such a charming and winning manner with her that Wang almost immediately lost his heart to her.

After some little conversation, the fairy that had conducted Wang to this beautiful spot in fairyland declared that the latter had expressed his utter disbelief in the existence of fairies, and he had therefore brought him here to give him ocular demonstration that his unbelief was absolutely without any sufficient reason. "I propose," he said, "that we have a grand feast and that we invite a great number of fairies from West, East, North and South to meet our guest, when he will get sufficient evidence of their existence that he will never be able to doubt again as long as he lives."

With many good-natured smiles this proposal was agreed to. A day was set, and messages to far-off fairy regions were sent by a telegraphy that far surpassed anything that had ever been thought of or invented by the profoundest brains of mortal man, for in some myterious way the intimation of the intended feast was carried to every expected guest in the course of a few minutes.

On the appointed day and punctual to the very hour the fairy visitors began to flock in from every quarter. Some came floating on clouds through which the sun had flashed his golden colours, till they seemed reclining on a royal throne. Another company came dashing through the great expanse on cranes, whilst immediately after a number followed on the mythical phœnix, and still more on various kinds of strange and fanciful-looking birds that were known only in those fairy regions of the world.

By the time they had all arrived, hundreds of fairies, both male and female, had assembled for the coming feast, which was spread on a great lawn, shaded by magnificent trees, with the scent and perfume of flowers filling the air with their sweetness. Whatever conceptions men may have of the nature and disposition of these mysterious beings that are supposed to have such an influence on human life, there was one thing revealed that day to Wang that gave him new thoughts about them, such as had never entered his mind before. He found that with all their supernatural powers they were in some respects as human as himself, and that laughter and fun and pleasant conversation were as much enjoyed as they would have been had the gathering

been one composed simply of men and women, who had assembled together to celebrate some festal occasion.

The only difference he could see was that there was more refinement and more courtesy shown to each other than would have marked a human assemblage that had met for purposes of festivity. There were smiling faces and bright laughing eyes that sparkled with amusement, and there were flashes of humour and delightful repartee, but no frown ever gathered upon the face of anyone at some remark that had been uttered, and no voice was raised in displeasure. It seemed, indeed, as though they had all set out to entertain each other, and all selfish motives had been banished from the heart of everyone.

At the conclusion of the feast, some time was spent in wandering amongst the spacious gardens, and in enjoying the beautiful flowers and inhaling the odours that exhaled a subtle fragrance of their own, such as can be found only in fairyland, where the dust of earth has never been able to soil with its touch the absolute beauty of these wonderful creations. Then an hour or two were spent in music, so new to Wang that his soul was touched by the exquisite harmonies that came with such ease and with such perfect taste from the strange instruments that the fairy fingers touched into life. After that preparations were made for the departure of the visitors to their various homes. This was a most interesting process, and Wang looked upon what was a very commonplace thing to the fairies with the keenest enjoyment. Those who had come on clouds, as above described, floated with the most perfect grace higher and higher towards the sun, until catching sight of fleecy, errant vapour, that seemed to have wandered from some snow-capped mountain, they seated themselves on it and were soon wafted out of sight.

All at once there was a rush, the sound of wings was heard, and a flock of beautiful white herons gracefully wheeled over the heads of the assembly. In an instant a number of the fairies with a light and airy movement rose from where they were standing, and the next moment the graceful birds were winging their way through a bright and

cloudless sky, until they became but mere specks in the far-off heavens and then were slowly lost to sight.

Hardly had the herons started on their romantic journey, when the shadows of another flight of birds fell upon the waiting guests and, looking up, Wang saw they were phœnix that had come to carry their masters and mistresses back to their far-off homes.

The mention of the phœnix as being amongst the birds that waited on the fairies is very interesting. The Chinese always hold that such really does exist though no one has ever possessed one and the place of their existence is absolutely unknown.

It is held to be a mythical bird that from its very mystery holds an important place in the thoughts of the Chinese. It is held to be very beautiful and its variegated colours are the theme of poets and are frequently reproduced in the paintings of celebrated artists. On the high wall that is invariably built to face the entrance to the courts of the mandarins, one of the favourite figures that are painted upon it is the phœnix. The bird is also used in connexion with marriage, and the bride and bridegroom are frequently described as a pair of phœnix.

Scarcely had a minute elapsed, when these birds, that occupy such an exalted position in the national estimation, with a stronger wing and more daring flight than those of the herons, were soaring away in a clear and unclouded sky.

After the last of the fairy visitors had taken his flight and the home had assumed its normal condition, the fairy that had brought Wang asked him if he were now satisfied that the fairies were not the creation of fancy but were beings that really had an existence. Wang assured him in tones of perfect conviction that his scepticism had entirely vanished and that he would never doubt again as long as he lived. When it was suggested that they should return to earth again Wang, whose heart had been completely captivated by Phœnix Clouds, made so many excuses to remain that it was finally settled that the other should go on in advance alone, whilst he should remain to study more fully the life and habits of the fairies. The result was that

in the course of a few months Phœnix Clouds was married to him and it was settled that he should take up his permanent abode in his new home.

For nearly two years Wang lived a most happy life in the fairy home, and his heart was more and more knit to Phœnix Clouds, when there came a longing over him to see his old father whom he had left behind him in the family homestead in the land of the mortals. He had often thought of him before, but never with such an intense desire to see him and to learn how he was at the present moment. On consulting his wife she became seriously alarmed, for she loved Wang with the same passionate devotion that he had for her. Since the time when he had taken up his abode amongst the fairies his character had immensely improved. The proud and imperious manners that had once distinguished him had vanished, and now he had become so gentle and modest under the new influence amongst which he had lived, that even the fairies felt attracted towards him, so loving and gentle was his whole bearing and demeanour.

Phœnix Clouds at first declared that it was possible for him to return to earth, but he would never be able to see her again. She belonged to fairyland, she said, and she did not see how she could accompany him to earth and live there like one of the ordinary mortals. On consultation, however, with some of the more experienced fairies who sympathized with her desire not to be separated from her husband, they declared that if Wang promised to return with his fairy wife after the death of his father the thing could be done. Wang, of course, gladly gave his consent to this, for he could as little brook the idea of separation as could his wife. The preparations were at once entered upon for the journey to earth, and for their departure from a home where Wang had spent the happiest days of his life.

On the morning of his departure Phœnix Clouds' sister came to him and said that she had a small present to make him which he was to take with him, and which he was to preserve with the utmost care. As his happiness and that of his wife, whilst he was a dweller on earth, would largely depend upon it, he must understand, she said, that it was of

the very first importance that no harm should come to it whilst they were on their journey to his father's home.

On examining this wonderful present, he found that it was a miniature house, the very facsimile of the one in which they were at present living. He was surprised at its beauty and the infinite care with which every detail in their present home had been reproduced. Not only were the halls and the rooms the same in number, but the furniture in them, down to its smallest article, was exactly similar. Only fairy hands could have produced within such a small compass the magnificent mansion with all its equipments with such fidelity as was done in this beautiful little model that could easily be laid upon the palm of the hand. "When you arrive at your native home," she said, "select some spot outside the village, and place this present of mine on it and you will see what will happen."

Stepping into a carriage that stood waiting outside the great entrance for them, Wang and his beautiful wife found themselves in a moment travelling at what seemed lightning speed far away beyond the sight of earth, where nothing but the sunlight shone around them, and where not even a cloud could be seen, so far had they soared above the highest point to which these ever float. In a very short space of time the carriage in which they were sitting began to take a downward course, and soon they were travelling amongst dense masses of clouds, which offered, however, not the slightest impediment to their onward speed. Then the mountains seemed to start like solitary islands out of a sea of mist and in a moment the whole landscape of plains and hills stretched out beneath them, and as in a flash they found themselves on the outskirts of the village where the family of Wang had always resided.

Remembering the parting words of Phœnix Clouds' sister, Wang had most carefully kept the beautiful model of their home in fairyland in his hand during the whole of the journey, and now, walking a short way from where they had landed, he laid it carefully on the edge of the plain that gradually sloped up in the direction of a neighbouring hill. No sooner had it touched the ground than it immediately

became transformed into a magnificent mansion, the very counterpart of the one in fairyland, with everything in it precisely the same as that they had left only a few minutes ago. The only things they missed were the friends that were so dear to them, and the exhilarating air that made life so joyous, and that was so in keeping with the immortals that breathed it.

Wang went almost immediately in search of his father. He found that great sorrows had come upon him since he had last seen him. The little money he had possessed had all vanished and the ancestral home was falling into decay. He was, indeed, in the direst poverty and the son had returned only just in time to save him from great suffering. He at once took him to his own home, where he was tended with the most loving care by Phœnix Clouds, and everything was done to make his last days happy.

For two years he lived a most gloriously happy existence, every want being met and every thought and desire of his heart being more than satisfied. At the end of that time he died and was buried with a magnificence that none of his ancestors had ever had the fortune to experience.

Next morning when men came out to have a glance at the great mansion that had been the wonder and the admiration of all those who had had the good fortune to behold it, it had completely vanished and not a single trace remained of it. The beautiful gardens, that had been the delight of great crowds that had been allowed to wander amongst them unreproved by Wang or his fairy wife, had completely disappeared and the ground was the wild, uncultivated common that it was before the mysterious model had been placed upon it two years ago by Wang. Many were the speculations of the country folks around as to what had become of him and his princely home, but no satisfactory explanation was ever given by anyone, and to this day the stories prevalent in that region about that wonderful building and of the lavish hospitality shown by its owners are told with glistening eyes and bated breath by the sons and daughters of those who had actually seen with their own eyes the wonders of those two eventful years.

IX.

THE MYSTERIOUS PEACH.

THE land of the fairies seems, in the estimation of those who have given any great attention to the subject, to be in some respects a counterpart of the one that is now inhabited by mankind. There is one essential difference, however, between the two, viz., that in the Western Heaven every one is immortal and has risen above the pains and sufferings that afflict poor fallen humanity. But just as in human life there are immense diversities of character and some men are sages, and emperors, and great statesmen, whilst others have nothing to mark them out as distinguished by any controlling intelligence, so in the Western Heaven there are fairies that take the first rank amongst the inhabitants of that happy land, whilst the great mass are content with lower aims and a meaner rôle than those whose genius and whose exalted conception of life place them in the forefront of the thought and intelligence of those who have got beyond the power of death for ever.

There are some for example, like Li of the Iron Staff, whose aim seemed to be the drawing forth in men the highest qualities of a virtuous life, and the developing in them of an ambition to become immortal. In the pursuit of this one supreme thought, they are willing to endure poverty, and to occupy the meanest positions in the world of men, if they could but induce them to be willing to endure the long trial of five hundred years that would finally qualify them to become members of the Western Heaven.

There are others again of the fairy tribe, who seem to be filled with a great pity for the suffering masses of men and women whose lives are spent in battling with poverty and misery and disease. They recognize that only an infinitely small percentage of the toiling masses of mankind have either the desire or the power to go through the long

probation that is to fit them to become immortals. They would, therefore, try and ease men's burdens as much as they can by putting as much laughter and fun and pleasant thought as they can think of into their hearts.

The old English conception of the fairies was a race of light-hearted beings that spent the moonlight in dancing on the sward under the boughs of great trees until the dawning light warned them to flee. They were also intensely kind-hearted and they were continually surprising men that were in any trouble or distress by gifts and favours that relieved the bitterness and the anguish of life. It would seem as though, in the imagination of the Chinese, the ideal fairies were something of this very same character. They never picture them indeed as dancing, because that is a form of enjoyment that never suggests itself to their Oriental minds, since the great, red-hot sun in the Far East makes rest and inaction symbols of happiness.

They are intensely interested, however, in relieving men and women who are in distress, and in bringing good fortune into homes that are about to be crushed by the weight of some impending calamity. They also like to make men laugh, and to send smiles into their faces, and to fill their hearts with such sunny thoughts that for a brief space, at any rate, the sombreness of life vanishes in the happy pictures that dance before their vision.

Our story tells of two light-hearted fairies, whose hearts beat with such tender sympathy and compassion for the men and women of the Celestial Empire, that they determined to descend to earth and perform such wonderful feats of magic that men would forget in their wonder and astonishment any griefs that might be gnawing at their hearts.

In order to remove any suspicion in the minds of men as to their true character, they determind to assume the rôle of jugglers, and one elected to be the father and the other to be the son. They were of the common type that one meets at country fairs, or in the busy towns, where no sooner do they take their stand in some open space than, as if drawn by a magnet, a crowd speedily gathers around them and stands with wondering eyes gazing upon their feats of

legerdemain. These men, though rough and uneducated and belonging to the commoner classes of society, are usually shrewd and intelligent, with a marvellous power in the use of their hands, a faculty of speech that gives them a persuasive oratory that bends the hearts of their audience to believe the deceptive stories with which they try to beguile them.

On a certain day in early spring, just about the time of the Feast of Tombs, two common-looking jugglers were seen wending their way towards a large city at which it was known there were to be a series of rejoicings, and crowds from all the country round would join with the inhabitants of the town in the festivities that were to be celebrated on a very large and liberal scale.

This Feast of Tombs is one of the great festivals of the Chinese. It extends over several days, and during these all families visit the graves of their dead, when they repair the damage that the wind and weather have worked during the past twelve months. They also bring offerings which they present to their departed relatives and impart to them the story of their lives; and either thank them for blessings which they believe have been sent into their homes, or beseech them to remove misfortune and load them with wealth and prosperity and every earthly comfort.

In the south, at least, at the time of this festival, each grave is decorated with yellow strips of paper which signify that the family to whom it belongs is still in existence, and that any one who would attempt to rob them of it would have to meet the united forces of the clan who would come forth to resist them. Where a grave has none of these papers on it it is a sign that the family has become extinct and that any poor and needy person who cannot afford to buy a piece of land in which to bury their dead, may appropriate it without any fear of being molested.

The gatherings on the hills during the Feast of Tombs give them quite a festal appearance, and to the younger members of the various families that gather there, they partake more of the character of a picnic. It is a veritable relief for them to get away from the narrow frowsy streets of

the city, and in the mountain air and in the pleasant sunshine enjoy a bit of nature for a day.

The two men that travelled with the crowds towards the city seemed to be of the ordinary kind that are met on such occasions as this. Their clothes were of the common homely blue cotton in which the masses of this Empire like to array themselves. They were evidently the worse for the hard service they had seen, for rents here and patches there showed that wear and tear were beginning to tell seriously upon them.

They had a worn look too about them that seemed to have made them careless about their appearance, for their hair was unkempt and it was evident that many a day had passed since any water had made acquaintance with their faces. The were typical specimens of a light-hearted Bohemian set of men, who with a restless spirit within them refuse to settle down to any of the ordinary avocations of men, but prefer to lead a roving life and gather excitement from the applause of the crowds that they entertain with their tricks.

Little did the people that walked side by side with them on the great thoroughfares that led to the city dream that the common-looking men that they regarded with a kind of good-natured contempt were citizens of the Western Heaven, who, in compassion for the greyness and dreariness of human life, had come down to earth to put a little laughter into men's hearts, and in the fun and merriment they could give them for an hour or two make them forget the weariness that dwelt in their hearts.

By and by the great city was reached, and what a scene of animation and excitement it presented. It seemed as though the spirit of the day had infected everyone and had banished the idea of work from every heart. There was no spread of bunting as is usual on such festal occasions in the West, and no flags run up from public buildings or from the merchant firms, to testify to the general hilarity that was making the entire population throb with one great spirit of enjoyment.

The Chinese have a more practical way of showing that the day was going to be to them a time of unmixed delight.

The farmer lads from the surrounding farms and villages seemed to be wandering aimlessly about, with open mouths and wide, staring eyes, gazing at the wonderful sights that the streets displayed. They wanted nothing more; they were content with simply that. They had got away from the monotonous, endless toil that is never broken into by the coming of the Sunday, and simply to do nothing but to feel that they can let go the everlasting grip of the hoe and wander about at their own sweet will is a thing that brings to them the most exquisite enjoyment.

China knows no such a day as Sunday, and consequently there is no division of time into weeks that mark the various stages of time into which the year is divided. They only know of months with which they measure off their time. Having no Sunday the work of the Empire goes on incessantly. The farmer tills his fields without any idea of resting. The shopkeeper opens his shop, a few holidays excepted, every day in the year. The boatman plies his boat for hire without ever dreaming of stopping even on great festivals or holidays, for these are the times on which he has the greatest numbers of customers and on which he is permitted to raise his fares. All classes, in fact, of society never dream of breaking off their work, as we do on Sunday, and so the perpetual workmill goes on grinding, making life a toil and a burden to the workers of the land.

Mention has been made of the hoe. This is an agricultural implement that in the Southern provinces of China, at least, is the one without which agriculture would be at a standstill. It takes the place of the spade, which is practically unknown in the South, for it can be used with much more effect.

A poor man that cannot afford to buy a cow or buffalo to drag his plough, when the time comes for preparing the fields for crops, does all the necessary work with the hoe. In the farmers' hands it can perform miracles, and through ages of experience the cultivators of the soil in this land have learned to use it with such success that they would consent to be bereft of every other implement rather than of it.

But simply walking about with mouths wide open like huge flycatchers may satisfy these tired sons of the soil, but

there are certainly large classes that would never consider that to be any specially happy way of spending a holiday. A Chinaman's ideal of thorough enjoyment is when he can get plenty to eat. This well-known passion is evidently thoroughly understood by the peddlers of the city, who get their living by catering for the people that come in from the surrounding districts to witness the festivities that are going to be held in the town. At every turn and corner those benevolent individuals have stationed themselves with their tempting refreshments, ready at a moment's notice to satisfy the wants of even the most hungry. Steaming cauldrons of rice boiled in such an appetizing way that few can resist their temptations, decaying cabbage and oysters that have lost their hold on life, and sausages, old and fragrant, with an odour that would put a Westerner to flight, all make up delicacies that few Chinese with any cash in their pockets can refrain from indulging in.

Others again of the younger generation, in addition to gorging themselves on the feasts that the itinerant dealers in delicacies dear to the common people have provided for them, consider that a festal occasion must be celebrated by a little excitement. One prominent source for this is theatricals, and so to-day all the Thespian bands of the town have been called into requisition, and almost every street resounds with the music of the stage, the beating of drums, and the loud, shrill voices of the actors as they perform their parts before their delighted audiences. Almost at every turning of the road one sees the crowds that have gathered around these impromptu stages, and men stand spell-bound as the players engage perhaps in some mortal conflict, or they are convulsed with laughter at some ludicrous dénouement in the play they are performing. For the time being everything is forgotten by the densely-packed audience, and the pains and sorrows of earth have fled before the voices and the gestures of the merry rogues that hold them in their grip.

Another source of excitement dear to the masses of the people of this Empire is gambling, and as we wander on down amongst the merry laughter-loving throngs we see how vast have been the preparations for enabling anyone that is

disposed for engaging in the national vice of the country. The regular gambling dens are all open and filled with solemn-visaged looking men who gaze with intensity upon the cards as though they contained the fortunes of life and death within them. These are the men that have money to lose, but facilities have been provided all over the city for those who would never dare to enter these larger establishments, and so at little nooks in the road, and in open spaces, and in the fronts of temples where the gods can look out grimly upon them, men with greasy-looking clothes and with opium-sodden countenances sit waiting with all the gambling apparatus complete to enable men to satisfy the passion that touches the heart of nearly everyone in the Empire.

Our two jugglers, without dallying by the way either to look at the exciting dramas that were being enacted, or to indulge in any of the savoury preparations of which the itinerant kitchens were sending forth their odours to tempt the lovers of good eating, made their way straight to the yamên, where they knew crowds would be attracted; for on this special festal occasion, the mandarins were bound by custom and by law to take an active part in guiding and directing the festivities of the day.

The yamên, it may be explained, is the official court and residence of the resident mandarin who has rule over the town and also over the district in which it is situated. In cases of the higher mandarins it is large and imposing, and is really the only public building in a city that is worthy of being looked at. A Chinese town is signally deficient in such, for besides it and the temples of the idols there are no public buildings worthy of the name. Town halls, infirmaries, hospitals, national galleries, spacious buildings where public meetings can be held, are still in the dim and distant future, and are only the dream of those that believe that China one day will become as great an empire as any of those that exist in the West.

When they got to the yamên they found that thousands had gathered in the vacant space in front and in the spacious courts that led up to the inner sanctum where all official business was ordinarily transacted. The solemn and dignified

air that usually rested over a place that was supposed to be the abode of justice, but where in reality the gravest wrongs were perpetrated under the name of law, had vanished, and an air of joyousness and frivolity filled the lofty courts with an atmosphere that must have seemed to them like an utter desecration of the imperial uses for which they had been built.

It was indeed a great occasion, for the mandarins were dressed in their richest robes, whilst the soldiers in attendance were attired in scarlet uniforms, that stood out in striking contrast against the universal blue of the crowds around. Bands of music too, were in attendance, which now and again, as if under the spell of the joyousness of the day, broke into sudden flights of music that made every face beam with delight, as they heard the screams and wails that remind one forcibly of a Highland bagpipe, not played on a hillside, but in some narrow street where its echoes have no room to escape.

The jugglers, who were there with a certain well-defined purpose, pressed their way through the laughing good-natured masses that were waiting to see what new forms of amusement would be suggested by the mandarins for their entertainment. Suddenly a man dressed in black came to them with a message from the great man and asked them what pieces of jugglery they could perform that would be entertaining for the crowds waiting to be amused.

"Tell their excellencies," they said, "we can do things more wonderful than jugglers ever performed throughout the length and breadth of China. We are no common performers, for we can make the living die and we can bring back the dead from their graves; there is nothing in fact that we cannot accomplish. Just ask the mandarins what they would like us to do and we will instantly proceed to carry out their wishes."

The messenger was amused at the high-flown talk of these wretched-looking jugglers and smiling he returned to the mandarins and reported what they had commissioned him to tell them. They were so entertained at what they considered the humour of the men that they laughed outright, and entering into the joke, they said "Will you go once more

and tell them we do not wish them to murder any one, neither will we tax their powers by asking them to bring back anyone from the Land of Shadows, but we should just like them to do us the small but easy favour of producing a peach that shall be equal to those that nature will give us in the course of a few months."

When this message reach the jugglers, the father pretended to be very much put out at what he considered the unreasonable request of the mandarins. "How is it possible for me," he said, "to produce a peach at this season of the year? Last winter's snow is still on the ground, and the time for the peach trees to blossom is still in the distance. How am I to be expected to produce something that nature itself cannot accomplish? It is most unreasonable of their excellencies to ask of me to do what they must know no human being has ever been known to attempt."

By this time the news of the trick that the mandarins had requested the jugglers to perform had spread with wonderful rapidity throughout the waiting crowds, and some were laughing, some were discussing the possibilities of the case, and some were laying wagers that these common-looking men could never do such a wonderful thing as to produce a rich, ripe peach whilst the snow was on the ground and whilst the transforming power of the peach trees still lay dormant within them. All was excitement and expectation and every eye was fastened upon them, wondering what magic power they could possess that would enable them to work such a miracle as had been demanded of them by the mandarins.

When the father had finished his complaint, the son, turning to him, said, "You must remember that you have already promised them to do whatever they liked to demand from you, and if you refuse to produce a peach for them they will call you a braggart and you will lose your reputation."

The father pretended to be troubled at the unreasonable request that had been made of him, but finally he said, "It is true that the earth at the present moment cannot produce a single peach, but I know that in the Western Heaven in a certain garden there are the most lovely peaches that ever

the eye looked on. To get one of these, I shall have to ascend the sky and steal one."

"But how are you going to get there?" asked the son. "Have you a ladder that will reach beyond the clouds and that will take you up to the land where you say the beautiful garden is where the peaches are growing?"

"Oh! that is very simple matter." replied the father, and going to his box where he kept the juggling apparatus, he took out a delicate coil of silken rope that he unwound with the greatest possible care. This he did most ostentatiously in the sight of the crowd, who by this time were being wrought up to a high pitch of excitement at the idea of a man actually climbing up into heaven to bring down a peach from those sublime regions to be handled and tasted by men on earth.

After unwinding the silken coils for some considerable time without apparently coming any nearer to the end of them, the juggler seized hold of the loose end and with a deft and masterly cast he flung it towards the sky, where, with a graceful spiral motion, it ascended swiftly through the air until it disappeared in a rift in the clouds and was lost to view. After a time the uncoiling of the silken rope stopped and the juggler announced that connexion had been securely made with the Western Heaven.

This, of course, filled the crowd with the most exalted idea of the wonder-working power of these two common-looking men. There was no deception in the miracle that had been wrought, for the silken rope was there plainly before their eyes, and it could be seen stretching in one unbroken line till lost from the keenest vision in the heights that stretched away towards the blue sky.

But the wonders that remainded to be accomplished were far to transcend in importance anything that had yet been done. As soon as the connexion was made with the unseen world, the father said to the son, "I am not as nimble as you are, so I think you had better climb the silken ladder and bring down the peach for the mandarins." The son, however, pretended to be afraid, and he said, "Supposing the rope were to break when I had got half-way up, my body

would be dashed into a thousand pieces, so that you would not be able to recognize me."

The father assured him that that was an impossibility and urged him to start on his journey without delay, otherwise the patience of the crowd would be exhausted. "You can catch hold of the knots that are on the silken rope, so that you will be kept from slipping, and, besides, you may be assured that when you return their excellencies will be so impressed by the wonders you have performed that they will certainly make you a present of enough money to buy yourself a wife. Now go on like a good son and let these people see how clever you are."

With a bound that electrified the whole of the spectators, he made a spring on to the rope, and in a moment was mounting the long slender-looking thread that reached away into the sky. Exclamations of wonder burst from every lip as the young man, apparently with the greatest ease, and skimming like a bird in the air, ascended higher and higher till his form was lost in the great expanse above.

Every eye was now turned towards the rift in the cloud into which the young juggler had vanished, and speculations were rife as to whether he would ever be seen again, and how he could possibly descend the thin slender rope by which he had climbed into the unknown land beyond. The more observant of them, watching the attitude of the father, observed that one hand was held out in an attitude as though he were waiting to catch a ball. There was a look too of eager expectation on his face that showed that he believed that his son would accomplish his mission and bring down the promised peach from the famous garden in the Western Heaven. Whilst he was looking with straining eyes into the fleecy clouds that moved gently along before the lightest of zephyrs, suddenly a black speck was seen descending with the speed of a meteor until it lay in the hand of the juggler.

The excitement was now beyond all control, and the people crowded round him to look at the peach that lay safely within his grasp. Extricating himself from the multitude, he struggled forward to where the mandarins

were seated and handed them the mysterious peach that had come from the unknown land beyond the clouds.

They were almost too afraid to touch it lest there should be some magic about it that would work some terrible mischief upon them. Taking heart, however, as the juggler assured them that this was a fairy peach that would ensure them from sickness and would even confer upon them the gift of immortality, they ventured at last to taste it, when to their delight the most exquisite aroma filled the yamên with its fragrance, and they declared that never had the most luscious fruit that the gardens of earth had produced been so delicious as this wonderful peach that the juggler had given them.

The latter meanwhile had returned to his station and was gazing with an anxious look into the place in the sky where his son had disappeared. All at once the silken rope fell in coils at his feet, but no sign could be traced of him anywhere in the wide expanse of heaven.

The father's heart now seemed to be torn withanguish. "Miserable me," he exclaimed, "I have lost my son. The owner of the peach garden has discovered the theft and in revenge he has murdered him, and I shall never see him again." He wrung his hands as though he were in the utmost despair, and his distress was so extreme that everyone around him was moved to pity as they listened to his expressions of grief for the loss of his son.

In the midst of these lamentations, which were uttered in a wild and wailing tone, a most weird and tragic incident occurred to give emphasis to the heart-rending sorrow of the juggler. Suddenly from the blue there appeared an object descending with a motion that was as rapid as a cannon ball that had been projected from above. On it came till it fell directly at the feet of the man who was convulsed with sorrow. With a cry of horror he picked it up, when it was discovered that it was the head of his son. Almost immediately after a leg came hurtling through the air, until bit by bit the whole of the dismembered body lay at the father's feet. Weeping and sobbing he picked them all up and packed them carefully in his juggler's box, until he could buy a coffin and have them buried.

The man kept bemoaning the sad fate that had caused him to lose his son, and appealed to the mandarins and the crowd to subscribe sufficient funds to enable him to give him a decent burial. The call to the people was responded to most liberally, and soon his bag, into which he had put the donations, was filled with the cash that were poured upon him. Stepping up to the box in which the mangled remains of his son had been carefully packed, and tapping on it a number of times, he said, in a loud voice, "Son, will you not come out and thank the people for the generous way in which they have subscribed to give you a royal funeral?" At once, to the amazement and delight of the large numbers who had witnessed the performance, the box-lid was slowly uplifted, and lo, and behold! the son was seen standing smiling and bowing to the wondering crowd.

The rebound from the distress that they had all felt for the supposed death of the young man was so great that the wildest joy filled the hearts both of the officials and of the assembled crowds. Everybody moreover had been filled with amazement at the wonderful performance that they had witnessed that day, and so when they beheld him in perfect health, as though nothing had happened to him, the public feeling expressed itself in demonstrations of gladness and unbounded joy. Every man was talking with his neighbour and speaking in admiration of the marvellous skill of the jugglers, when all at once it was discovered that the two men had mysteriously vanished and not left a single trace behind them. No one had seen them leave the yamên, but suddenly and without a word they and their boxes and the juggling apparatus had dissolved into the thin air. Everybody then knew that no common conjurors had been there that day entertaining the people, and that the tricks that had so astonished the assembled crowds could only have been performed by the fairies.

Several weeks went by and a marvellous change had come over the mandarins that had partaken of the fairy peach. The juggler had told them that the eating of it would confer immortality upon them. This they treated as a joke that was uttered at random by a man who was

endeavouring to astonish his audience by the bravery of his words. As the days went by a subtle transformation, however, came over them that changed their whole thoughts about life. They were no longer anxious to amass money, and they utterly repudiated the idea of accepting bribes to influence their decisions in public matters. They had been previously famous for their rapacity and the shameless way in which they perverted justice. Their fame for integrity spread with marvellous rapidity throughout the district over which they ruled, and men spoke of them as the embodiment of the ancient sages of China. One day a great storm gathered over the city. The heavens were black with dense clouds that trailed along the earth and turned everything into midnight. The lightnings flashed and the thunders reverberated with terrific grandeur till every heart ceased almost to beat. It seemed as though it was some great occasion in which the powers of nature were called forth to give a fitting colouring to some momentous event that deserved more than a passing recognition.

When the sun shone forth once more, and the mist and clouds had vanished from the earth, it was discovered that these mandarins whose names were beginning to be household words in every home had suddenly and mysteriously disappeared in the midst of a flash of lightning that had startled and terrified the city, and that no trace of them could ever be discovered by any of their sorrowing friends and relatives.

X.

THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF THE SCHOLAR SIU.

ONCE upon a time there lived in the wild and mountainous region of Shansi a scholar of the name of Siu. Though still a young man he had gained the first of the four degrees that China is prepared to bestow upon the students of the empire, and he had shown such exceptional ability in the papers that he had written that the Imperial Examiner gave him a title that showed he had passed with honours.

There are four degrees open to literary aspirants in China. The first is called "Refined Ability" because of the superior intellect that the graduate displays. The second is styled "The Commended Man" because his name is mentioned by the Imperial Examiner as one worthy of note throughout the empire. It is a fact that a man who gains this degree has his name published amongst the scholars and literary men throughout the whole country. The third is called the "Advanced Scholar," because the man that obtains it has proved by three severe examinations that his scholarship is deep and profound. The fourth is named "Forest of Pens," and the distinguished graduate becomes a member of the Imperial Hanlin Academy in Peking, and all the highest honours of the Empire are open to him.

In addition to the reputation that Siu had obtained for his literary ability, he had won the reverence and respect of the whole country side for his filial devotion to his widowed mother. There was no sacrifice that he was not willing to endure for her, and no self-denial that he was not prepared to undergo for her sake. His fame had travelled far and had even reached the land of the fairies, who were so moved by the stories that were told them about him that it was determined that whenever the occasion arose they would show

their appreciation of his virtues by some special favour that they would bestow upon him.

The opportunity was not long in coming. One day Siu fell ill, and his disease seemed such a serious one that his mother's heart was wrung with agony as she witnessed the sufferings he had to endure.

As he lay tossing about on his bed one day, a man suddenly appeared at his bedroom door and with a polite bow and a most gracious smile invited Siu to get up and go with him. "I have brought a horse with me," he said, "for you to ride upon, and he stands outside waiting to carry you to the place to which I have to lead you."

Mr. Siu was greatly struck with the appearance of his mysterious visitor. He had a most gracious, but imposing manner with him, and he was dressed in robes such as only the highest mandarins are accustomed to wear. What impressed the sick man most, however, was the tender, winning way he had with him and the look of concern that he had upon his face as he gazed into the eyes of Siu and saw how he was suffering.

Little did the latter realize that the man that stood at the door with such a benevolent face was a fairy, who had come from the pearly gates of bliss to reward him by a signal piece of service for his loving devotion to his mother.

Siu excused himself from accepting the invitation of the unknown, by saying that he was too ill to think of taking a journey then, and that it was impossible for him even to lift himself from his bed. The stranger, who had a masterful though perfectly courteous manner, still pressed him to get up and at once start with him. After a most vigorous but exceedingly painful effort, Siu managed to get out of bed and crawl to the door where he found a white horse fully caparisoned waiting for him.

The moment he got on the horse's back he seemed relieved from his disease, the pain and weariness from which he had been suffering entirely vanished, and life seemed to open up to him new possibilities. There was one thing that greatly astonished him as they rode along and that was that the roads and the scenery through which they passed

were entirely strange and unknown to him. It seemed indeed that from the moment he left his home he was wandering in fairy land, for the scenes amongst which he had spent his life had vanished completely from his gaze.

After travelling for some time they came to what seemed to him like a royal city, the capital of an empire, for the walls were massive and lofty, like those that surround Peking, and there was a grandeur and a repose about them that showed that personages of exalted rank had their dwellings within them. Passing through one of the spacious gates, his guide led him by devious ways and along great thoroughfares, crowded with restless, throbbing crowds until at last they entered what was really the palace of the reigning king. Entering through the great gates, where shadowy-looking guards kept ward and watch, he was led through courtyard after courtyard into a magnificent pavilion, where about a dozen men splendidly attired were sitting in solemn silence as though they had been awaiting his arrival. The central and most commanding figure of them all Siu recognized from the pictures that he had often seen as being the dread King of the Land of Shadows, who ruled with despotic power over the region of the dead.

The other world is called by the Chinese the Land of Shadows, because it is believed to be a sunless land, where shadows lie from year to year and from age to age, and where gloomy skies look down upon the spectral figures of men and women that dwell in that unhappy country. Hades is in fact universally considered to be the negative side of the present world, where the sun shines and human life has many joys to make it bright and happy. The Land of Shadows is supposed to be the reverse of all this, although it is fashioned on very much the same principles and plans.

There is much confusion of thought on the subject, but it would seem to many to be but a second edition of the present Chinese Empire, with its provinces and towns, and cities, and mandarins holding rule there as they do here. There is one thing about which all are agreed and that is that the final awards for good and evil lie within the hands of Yen Lo, the Indian Yama, the dread Ruler of Hades, and

that there is no appeal against his decisions. It is for this reason that men so dread the thought of entering the kingdom over which he rules.

Siu had no doubt whatever that the imposing personage who acted as President of this venerable assembly was really the ruler of the underworld, and whilst he was debating in his own mind what this strange meeting portended, he was informed by the King that he was about to undergo an examination in order to test his ability and show what position he was qualified to fill in his kingdom.

He was then directed to a table close by on which were pens and ink and paper, and at which a solitary figure sat as though he too were to go through the same process that was demanded of him. Hardly was he seated when the Prince gave out the subject of the essay they were to write upon. It consisted of eight characters and was enigmatical enough to have been given by the Delphic Oracle. Freely translated the words meant "One man, two men; with high purpose, with no high purpose."

The two men sat down to try and discover the hidden meaning that the examiners had wrapped up in this cryptic sentence. Siu's mind was a philosophical one, and it soon flashed upon him that these words contained a profound teaching that lay at the root of all human actions.

The "one man" referred to the individual himself with his doubts and fears and with his wide world of thought. "Two men" included every other man outside of his own life, his neighbour in fact, with whom he was knit by bonds that could never be broken.

"With high purpose" pointed to the man who had a purpose in life, and kept that as the ideal from which he never willingly departed. The mistakes he might make or the errors of judgement into which he might fall could be easily condoned, because men felt that in pursuing the noble aims by which he hoped to enrich the world, those were but evidences of the frailty of human nature.

"With no high purpose" designated the ordinary run of men who take life as it is, and who have no intention of helping anyone but themselves. If they do anything that

turns out to be really good and serviceable they deserve no credit for it, for it is not through pain and suffering that they have achieved it but by an accident.

When Siu handed his paper to the King, murmurs of admiration expressed the delight which he and the officials about him felt at the beautiful thoughts that gleamed like gems throughout it. Faces beamed with smiles, and eager whispered conferences were held amongst these great mandarins, and finally the Prince said to Siu, "We are profoundly impressed with the beauty of the essay you have just written and the exquisite thoughts you have expressed in it, and I have determined at once to appoint you to a high post in the province of Honan to which you will at once proceed."

These words were no sooner uttered than Siu as with a flash of lightning realized for the first time that he was no longer in the land of the living, but that he was really in that Land of Shadows and that he was face to face with the great King that was so feared by mortals. He was so paralyzed with the thought that his heart sank within him, and for a time he felt himself absolutely unable to utter a single word.

Recovering himself he besought His Majesty to listen to his humble petition. "I have an old mother," he said, "in my home, who is seventy years of age, whose heart will be bowed down with sorrow at my loss. Let me return to her, I beseech you, that I may comfort and care for her as long as she lives, and when death comes and I have offered the proper sacrifices to her spirit at the grave then I shall willingly come back and carry out the gracious plan you have so generously arranged for me."

The King looked down with compassion upon Siu and turning to one of the high mandarins by his side he said to him, "Bring me the Book of Life and Death that I may see how long the old lady has yet to live." There is a belief that the Prince of the Dark World has a register of every human being, in which the day in which each was born is recorded as well as the appointed time when he must die. This is called the Book of Life and Death. The Chinese theoretically are fatalists, as they believe that the length of

each person's life is settled by the dread powers in the under world. They are, however, too practical to allow their thoughts on this subject to interfere with the duties and responsibilities of every-day life.

In a few minutes he returned and turning over its pages it was found that it was recorded that her life had yet nine years to run.

"Your prayer is granted," said the Prince to Siu, "and your companion here will take your place until your mother's death, when I shall again summon you to undertake the duties to which I have appointed you."

These words that filled the heart of Siu with profound satisfaction and delight had hardly been uttered when Yen Lo, with his attendant ministers rising from their seats, informed him that he was now at liberty to return to the life of the world that he had so recently left, and that until his mother died there would be no call upon him to appear again in the Land of Shadows.

Approaching the scholar who had been examined at the same time that he was, and who was to occupy his position until the time had elapsed when he was to take it up himself, he got into conversation with him and he found that he was a man of generous and enlightened views. He seemed dull, however, and depressed because Yen Lo had not given him a release and permitted him to return to his home in the land of sunshine as he had done to Siu. He talked of his friends from whom he had been torn, and he grieved that he should never again see the faces of those whom he loved so dearly.

As they were conversing, they, unconsciously as it were, strolled away from the great hall where the examination had been held. Siu indeed felt impelled by an impulse that he could not account for to be moving, although he had no definite purpose as to the direction towards which his steps should take.

Passing through several great rooms that lay in gloom and shadow, and descending magnificent flights of stone steps, they at last came to the palace gates through which they emerged into the streets of the city. Here the crowds

were as dense and the thoroughfares just as narrow as could be found in the sunlit empire of the upper world. Siu noticed, however, that a gloom seemed to rest upon everything. No smiles lit up the faces of any of those that he met and no sound of laughter broke upon the air, nor did a single note of music anywhere dispel the universal air of melancholy that pervaded this solemn-looking city.

Drawn as it were by an unseen hand, they found themselves winding and turning down the intricate streets of this sunless city until at last they came to the huge and massive gates that led into the country that lay beyond the battlements that guarded the town. Coming up to these, Siu's companion stopped him and declared that he was not permitted to go any further with him, and in a few parting words he besought Siu when he returned to earth to visit his friends and tell them how he was and what were Yen Lo's plans for him in the future.

No sooner had he got outside the gates than he was surprised to find the stranger who had led him from his sick bed into the Land of Shadows waiting for him, and with the same winning smile and tender, gracious manner that had before won his confidence he informed him that he was going to conduct him back again to his home. Mounting the horses that had evidently been waiting for his arrival, they proceeded on their journey, through the same kind of scenery that had charmed and delighted him when he travelled through it before.

As they advanced on their way, Siu was conscious of a growing exhilaration that filled his heart with a pleasure that he had not known since he left his home. The atmosphere seemed too to grow brighter, and the gloom and shadows that permeated everything he had looked upon in Hades became tinged with a light that was never found in the Land of Shadows. Suddenly in the far-off horizon there gleamed such golden flames that the whole landscape was touched with their glory, and in an instant his courteous companion had vanished from his side, and the sights and scenes through which he had passed slowly melted into oblivion, and like a dream at the opening day had completely crept out of his memory as though they had never existed.

Siu's mother was sitting in her room desolate, and her heart was torn with anguish for the loss of her son. Her only hope and stay in life had gone out of it. He had been dead about twenty-four hours and had been laid in his coffin, but the lid had not yet been nailed down. All at once she heard a strange sound in the room where her son lay.

Rushing in she found to her amazement and delight that the son she had been mourning for as dead was alive and sitting up in his coffin. With tears, that gleamed like dewdrops through which the morning's rays were flashing, she expressed out of the fulness of her heart the joy she felt that he had in some miraculous way been brought back to life again, and that now they would be once more happy together as they had been in the days of the past.

It was some time before Siu could quite take in the whole situation. His journey to the Land of Shadows and his strange experience there had passed completely from his memory, so that he had no recollection of what had happened during the last twenty-four hours. He knew indeed that he had been very ill, but he never dreamed that he had died, and with a puzzled, anxious look, he asked his mother how he happened to be in a coffin, and what meant all these preparations for a funeral.

She explained that his severe sickness had seemed to terminate in death. The doctor had testified that he had presented all the appearance of one who had been bereft of life. They had consequently made all preparations for his funeral, and had he not so wonderfully recovered from the deep swoon into which he had fallen, he would in a few hours have been carried to the hillside and buried amongst his kindred who had departed this life.

"But let us not talk of that now," she said, with a beaming face and with eyes alight with pleasure. "We shall talk no more of death, for you seem to have recovered in a most remarkable way from the deadly disease, that we thought had carried you off."

Nine years went by and at last the mother died and was laid in her grave on the hillside. Siu with true filial devotion saw that everything was done that would minister

to her comfort in the Dark World, and the offerings were made at her tomb that would prevent her being a hungry, wandering ghost in that gloomy land.

The anxiety that Siu felt for the welfare of his mother in the Land of Shadows was exceedingly natural from a Chinese standpoint. The universal opinion about that other world is that it is a place that is full of sorrow, where men and women have to live without sufficient food and clothing.

The Chinese have a very great dread of having to live in the Land of Shadows without sufficient to eat and to wear. To be a naked spirit there is one of the terrors connected with that place from which men shrink with horror. The whole system of the worship of the spirits of the dead and the offerings of food at the graves and in the ancestral halls have as their main object the providing of sufficient food for their relatives in that dreary land. It is believed that it cannot be got there, but must be provided for them by the living here.

This is such an article of faith with the Chinese that the whole of their seventh month is mainly taken up with special services and offerings of food to the spirits of those whose relatives in this world are all dead, and who, therefore, cannot make the customary sacrifices of food that are to reach them in the Land of Shadows, and keep them from starvation.

It is believed that Yen Lo, the supreme god of the other world, has such pity upon these unfortunates that for a whole month he orders the gates of Hades to be thrown open wide, and these hungry spirits are allowed to roam about the world and feed upon the feasts that men everywhere provide for them. At the end of that time, impelled by a force that none may resist, they troop back again to the underworld, no longer suffering from the pangs of hunger. The food they have been ravenously eating for a whole month is believed to be quite enough to sustain them for an entire year, when they will once more be let loose to partake of the good things so generously provided by the public.

Full of sorrow at his loss, and sad and discontented in the home that seemed so desolate now that his mother was gone, Siu lay down to rest.

In the grey twilight of the next morning a stranger happened to pass by his home, and was astonished to see a wonderful procession of horses and high officials and attendants slowly wind away from the home of the scholar.

Next morning people awaited the coming forth of Siu from his room, but they waited in vain, for when they entered they found that his spirit had left him and that he lay calm and silent in death. The neighbours thought that it was sorrow for the death of his mother that had killed him. They little dreamed that it was a message from the Ruler of Hades that had summoned him away.

XI.

THE ROMANTIC STORY OF THE PHŒNIX FAIRY.

ONCE upon a time in the famous province of Shensi, a region where the earliest traditions of the Chinese race have their origin, and where the men of to-day find the most stirring stories of the birth of this great Empire, there lived a young man of the name of Liu. His home was in the county of "Peace and Joy," and there the wonderful events that we are about to relate took place.

Liu was a remarkably good-looking young fellow and was endowed with abilities that were far beyond the common. It is related of him that when he was a lad of only fifteen years of age, he went in for his examinations for B.A. and though he was so young and could hardly have been expected to pass where several thousands of scholars were competing with him, he yet came out at almost the very head of the favoured few that were happy enough to obtain the coveted degree.

He was a natural born genius, but as is often the case with very original characters, he was apt to be uncertain and unstable in his ways. He had been left an orphan whilst quite young and had fallen into very irregular and indolent habits, such as threatened to wreck his life and prevent him from attaining to the high position that nature intended he should occupy, through the profuse gifts with which she had endowed him.

Fortunately there was a kindly fairy who saw that the magnificent abilities that he possessed were being wasted, and he determined that he would do his very utmost to deliver him from the evil habits and turn him into a distinguished member of society.

By careful observation he saw that the young man was not radically bad, but rather, because there was no one who

had authority to give him advice, he was drifting into habits that would lead to further deterioration of character. Our story will tell of the ingenious method that this kind-hearted being took to save Liu from the errors into which he had fallen.

One evening he had been invited by a friend to take supper with him, when he suddenly remembered that when he left home he had forgotten to put out the light. Fearful lest some accident should happen and that the house might be burned, he begged to be excused for a short time whilst he went and saw for himself that everything was all right. As he drew near to his dwelling, he saw that the light was burning brightly within, and, as he came close up to it, he heard the sound of persons talking to each other in a low voice as though they were discussing some matter that they did not wish anyone else to hear.

His first impression was that the people next door had something to do with this, for their character was not above suspicion, and he had long been fearful that there was something very morally wrong about them; or it flashed upon his mind that the voices he heard might be those of the fox fairies.

There is a wide-spread belief over China in what is called the fox fairy. The superior cunning and intelligence of the fox may, in the very earliest times when superstition was rife, have led to the fiction that that animal had power of transforming itself at will into a human shape and of acting the parts either of men or of women and of interfering in the common events of every-day life, and indeed of performing the functions that only men are deemed capable of carrying out. For this reason we find that in studying the folklore of any particular district, or the mythological stories, the fox in his various transformations acts a very important and interesting rôle. As Liu had absolutely no fear of these mysterious beings, and indeed was anxious to meet one face to face, he rushed incontinently into his house, when to his amazement he saw a young man of singularly prepossessing appearance, and with a refined and scholarly air, sitting in his bedroom. No sooner did the stranger catch sight of

Liu, than he became apparently paralyzed with fear, and making a rush for a side door disappeared through it, and vanished from sight.

Looking around the room, Liu discovered that he had in his hurry forgotten to take away with him one or two of his upper garments. These were of most curious workmanship and of materials such as he had never seen before. Evidently the fingers that had wrought the figures on these articles of dress were no human ones, neither had the stuff of which they had been made ever been woven in the looms of earth.

That the owner of them was a fairy, Liu had now no manner of doubt, for on examining them minutely he discovered to his amazement that one of them, a long gown, was of most delicate texture and as light as gossamer, and rendered the person invisible that had it on. Testing this point to see if it were true, he found that when he put it on he became absolutely invisible and that he could move about with the lightness and rapidity of a bird.

Carefully folding this up he put it safely away for future emergencies. He had hardly done so when a young man came into the room where he was sitting, and in a very humble tone and with a modest demeanour begged Liu to restore him the things that a friend of his had left behind him.

"Can you describe the things, that you say were left here?" Liu asked him.

"Certainly, I can," he replied, and he at once gave a minute description of the articles he came to claim. Liu, who knew the extreme value of the property claimed, for some time refused to deliver them up.

"I do not think that I shall consent to let you have them at all," he at last said.

"What right has anyone to come into my house when I am away, and take possession of it as though it were his own? I cannot conceive what motive the man had whose clothes you wish me to give up to you, and so I must be careful how I act in a case like this, lest others might take advantage of my good nature and come in when I am away and carry off some of my property."

The young man seemed greatly distressed at this decision of Liu, and begged and entreated that he should consent to reconsider it, for it was of the utmost importance to the owner of the clothes that he should be able to recover them. He offered that if Liu would grant his request he would provide a grand feast for him, where he would be regaled with all the delicacies of the season, and where eatables that had never been found on the tables of monarchs, and fairy peaches from the gardens in the Western Heaven, and flowers that never bloomed on earth, would grace the feast that would be spread for him and his friends.

Liu refused to consider this tempting proposal, and the young man then offered to give him a large sum of money that would be sufficient to enrich him for life, but he once more declined to be tempted even by this most seductive offer.

Leaving Liu for a moment, he went out, but returning almost in a moment, he said, "I have another proposition to make to you, which I hope this time you will be induced to listen to. If you will give me the things I ask for," he continued, "I will prepare a most beautiful bride for you, that shall be more comely and charming than any maiden that has ever been seen in all this region."

"Who is the lady you refer to," eagerly asked Liu, "and tell me more particularly what she is like."

"The maiden I shall bestow upon you," said the young man, "is named the Phœnix Fairy because of her grace of manner, and the beauty of her person. In all the annals of China there has never been any one of the celebrated beauties that have surpassed her in any of the charms with which she is endowed. Even Mo Hi and T'a Ki, whom poets and painters like to take as the ideals of every womanly grace and beauty, were in no way superior to the Phœnix Fairy who shall be yours, if you will only hand over to me the articles I am anxious to recover."

"I willingly agree to your proposal," said Liu, "and when you have produced the lady, I shall with pleasure hand you over the things that are in my keeping."

"I pray you not to make such terms with me. You must trust me; it would be quite impossible for me to

produce the lady on the instant, but that she will come to you without delay you may be assuredly certain. The things I want from you are, for certain urgent reasons, needed at once, and so I beg of you let me have them now, and so relieve the anxiety of the person who had the misfortune to leave them behind when he fled from your room."

Seeing the real distress of the young man, and believing that the contract would be faithfully carried out, he consented to hand over the fairy possessions and believe that in due time his bride would appear.

Several days went by without the appearance of the lady that had been promised him, and he began to be suspicious that he had been deceived when, one evening as he was sitting in his study, the door was suddenly opened, and two men appeared in the doorway, leading in a young girl, who was strikingly beautiful, and who far surpassed the vision that his mind had conjured up when he had been promised a bride in exchange for the fairy garments that he had got in such an unexpected manner.

All the pictures that the most famous artists had drawn of the most celebrated beauties of the past seemed but tame and common placed beside this maiden, who, with a modest look, and with a person exquisitely moulded and fashioned by nature in her brightest artistic attempts, stood in front of him.

"This is the lady," one of the men that accompanied her said, "who was promised to you a few days ago. She is yours, and you need not attempt to investigate into her parentage or from what land she comes. Be assured that the prize you have won is a rare one, for in all the world there is not a fairer nor more noble character than the girl that comes of her own free will to be your wife."

That the union was an exceedingly happy one was proved by the fact that the deepest and profoundest love sprung up in the hearts of them both for each other. It was an ideal marriage, and never in the romance of fiction, or in the fervid imagination of the poet, had such a pure and exalted love as that which existed between Phœnix Fairy and Liu been ever imagined or conceived.

Some months went by of extreme happiness to both, but the great purpose for which the fairies had interfered in the case was as far as ever from being accomplished. Liu instead of being impelled to a nobler and more strenuous life, led even a more easy and a less ambitious one than he had been accustomed to. There had been many times when he had been spurred to a noble exertion and had shown that he possessed abilities of a very high order. Since his marriage, however, to "Phœnix Fairy" it had seemed as though he had abandoned every noble aim in life, and settled down to be contented with the ordinary and humdrum routine that men with common minds so naturally fall into.

Something heroic, consequently, had to be done to save him, and the one to do that was his fairy wife, who mortal though he was, loved him with as passionate a love as ever woman felt for man in any time of the world's history. In playing her part she would have to take her share of suffering, but to emancipate her husband, and to arouse ambitions within him that would lead him to a higher plane than that on which he was now living, was a task that she alone could perform.

One morning, with a shadow on her face, Phœnix Fairy approached her husband and in a sad and mournful voice informed him that she would be compelled to leave him for a time, how long she could not say, but there were imperative reasons why she had to be separated from him. She could not reveal these to him now, but the day would come when she trusted they could be told him, and then he would see that they were such as would appeal to his judgment as being eminently wise and proper. The next moment she had vanished from his presence, and no trace could be found as to where she had gone.

Liu was in a terrible state of despondency, and it seemed for a long time as though the heroic measures that Phœnix Fairy had adopted to arouse her husband to a wider conception of his duties as a man would be an entire failure. Instead of trying to relieve the intense sorrow of mind that oppressed him, by taking up his studies that had been neglected so long, he became moody and silent.

For days together he spent his time in brooding over his loss. There was nothing in life that seemed to influence him, and his books lay in his study untouched by him, as though they had lost all their power over him.

The weeks went by but they seemed to bring no consolation to Liu, and it appeared as though he would sink permanently into an indolent misanthropic mood, from which it would be difficult to arouse him. Phœnix Fairy, who had been watching him all the time with a heart full of intense love, saw at last that it was time to intervene in order to save him from having his life completely wrecked.

One day Liu was climbing the mountain path that led to a famous temple when he saw a lady riding on a horse coming down the road towards him. She was closely veiled, but as she came up to him she lifted it slightly, and then to his unutterable joy he discovered that it was his wife, that he had begun to despair of ever seeing again. Phœnix Fairy, for it was she, at once dismounted, and sitting with her husband under the shadow of a huge tree, she spoke to him about the need there was to exert himself, and not to allow himself to fall into habits that would disqualify him for taking his proper place in the world.

Liu excused himself for his recent conduct by explaining that her disappearance had affected him with such a profound melancholy that he had found it simply impossible to overcome it, and he feared that if she saw no way to accomplish her return home, his hopes of happiness would be so blighted that he would never feel any incentive to work again.

Phœnix Fairy, with words of tenderness and love, endeavoured to console him, and she reminded him that the length of their separation depended entirely upon himself. "The fates had so decided it," she said, "that unless he rose to the position that he might do by a strenuous use of the abilities with which heaven had endowed him, he would lose her for ever."

"This," she continued, "would be as great a sorrow for me as it could possibly be for you, and so I beseech you, by the love you bear for me, to dismiss your melancholy

thoughts and give your heart to work in a way that you have never done in all your life before. Remember that your fortunes lie within your own grasp, but the only way in which you can seize them is by your books that you have neglected for so long a time."

"In order, however, to stimulate you to a new exertion," she said, "I will give you a picture of myself, that you can look upon whenever you get weary and want to see me. It will be such a living, striking one that when you look upon it, it will be as though I were standing before you, and I were a living reality with whom you could hold converse."

Saying this, she put into his hands a gold case, which she told him contained her portrait, so portrayed that, whilst he could see her figure distinctly, her face would never be visible to him unless he had been working hard at his studies. If he, therefore, loved her as he said he did, he could always through the medium of hard work enjoy a most realistic sight of her whenever he desired.

In a moment, as on one or two former occasions she vanished from his sight, and he was once more left with his heart full of heaviness and despair. By and by, he opened the case that Phœnix Fairy had given him and began to examine the picture of her that it contained. It was a rare product of the artist's genius; indeed, he felt convinced that it was no human hand that had drawn that beautiful figure, that stood out from the paper as though it had been a living being.

Whilst he gazed upon it, he felt his heart throb with excitement as he saw what a perfect image he had of his beloved wife. She was in miniature, it is true, but there was such an air of reality about her, that a sense of companionship sprang up within him.

He fancied that he could see her breathing, for her form rose and fell just as a living, breathing person's would have done. The pose that she took was the one she naturally had on ordinary occasions, and her dress was the one that he admired the most of all among the various kinds in which she used to array herself.

The only disappointing thing about this exquisite reproduction of his wife was the fact that her face was turned

away from him, and all that he was allowed to see was a back view of her. Long and eagerly did he look at the picture, hoping every moment that she would turn round and cast one of her lovely smiles upon him, but in vain. A view of her face, she had declared, could only be obtained through constant persistent work, and, as he saw her standing with her back to him, he realized that his only chance of happiness was by a steady application to his studies.

As soon as he reached his home, he hurried away to his sanctum, and collecting his books he laid out a plan of reading that meant severe toil and labour. He felt that if ever he was to gain possession of his wife again, he must be prepared to endure the greatest self-denial, and that the days of idleness in which he had so long indulged had passed away never again to be repeated until he had gained the very highest honours that the state could give him.

Placing the picture of Phœnix Fairy before him, where his eye could catch it whenever he lifted his head from his books, he began the study of those famous classics of China that were to be the means by which his beloved wife was to be restored to him.

After he had been studying hard for some months and had mastered some of the books upon which he would be examined by the imperial examiner in the course of a few months, he was one day immensely delighted to find that the figure of his wife in the picture had slightly turned round, and he could distinctly see her face smiling upon him. It was a side face it is true, but it was just enough to enable him to catch the beautiful expression that had always exercised such a charm over him, and to let him know that she was in a supremely happy mood because he was carrying out her desires in sedulously giving himself up to study.

His work once more assumed a different aspect from what it had done before this delightful change in the position of the figure had taken place. He had been highly comforted and inspired by the thought that a living image of his wife was close beside him, and that the atmosphere of her presence filled the room that would otherwise have been dreary indeed without her.

Now, however, a new feeling of delight filled his heart. The old musty books took on a new colouring, and the crabbed old-world works that seemed to lie with a look of defiance and mystery on their pages appeared to peer into his face with a facetious air, as though they were going to put some side-splitting conundrum to him.

The little glimpse into the heart of his wife that he got from this side glance of her gave a new impetus to his studies. The dreary unimaginative sentences that had fallen like lead from his lips, as he read them in the high falsetto key with which the scholars in China invariably try to grasp them and retain them in their memory, now assumed an airy form as though they were pervaded with the scent of spring blossoms, and contained the essence of all poetry and romance.

The Chinese in their studies pursue a different method from the students in the West. There a mastery of any book is obtained by silent study, and a careful grasping of the meaning that lies embedded in the pages before them. In China the method is quite different. The words are read aloud at as high a pitch as the voice can carry without unduly fatiguing it.

This system is begun when the lads go to school. The strange, weird characters seem to them like a strong fort that has to be taken by storm, and so with youthful vigour they shout out the names of each one at the very top of their shrill young voices, until they have captured them, and put them like so many prisoners within the bounds of their memory, to be retained there as long as they live. This unwieldy and what seems to us very harassing system of study, is one that they do not seem to be able to give up, for even when the boys become men they go on reading in this manner till they are considerably advanced in years. An attempt has been made in schools that are conducted by foreigners to get the lads to prepare their lessons without roaring them out at the highest pitch of their voices, but with a very small measure of success.

The boys say they cannot fix the hieroglyphic pictures in their memory by simply looking at them. This, of course, is nonsense, for many foreigners have learned to read Chinese

without adopting the uncouth and extraordinary methods of the Flowery Land.

The custom, however, has been so ingrained into the minds of students of this land during the long centuries of the past, that it will take a very long time to persuade both teachers and taught that the Western methods are more efficacious, and certainly less wearing on the system, than are those that have long been in vogue in the empire.

Liu's progress under this new inspiration became very rapid. There was now a definite purpose before him which he saw was capable of accomplishment, and besides he had the consciousness that the one he loved the best in all the world was ever by his side and that her active sympathy spurred him on, as nothing else could have done.

In the course of a few months after the face of Phœnix Fairy had been slightly turned towards him, he went in for his examination for the degree of LL.D. and he passed most triumphantly. He had but one more to go up for, when, if successful, he would have taken all the degrees that the empire had to bestow.

The degrees that Chinese scholars can take are, (1) *siutsai* (embroidered talent); (2) *kujên* (the advanced man); (3) *tsinsze* (advanced scholar); and (4) becoming a member of the Hanlin College. The first of these is taken in the chief city of the prefecture in which the candidate resides, the second in the provincial capital, whilst the third and fourth are competed for in the capital of China. The fourth is one invested with a great deal of dignity, for in it the emperor is the examiner, and the man who gains that degree is quite certain of gaining high official rank before many years have gone over his head.

Some writers have made these degrees to correspond with those gained by our university graduates in England, but in this they have made a mistake, for the wide difference in the subjects of examination renders it impossible to make any comparison between the two. In England the course embraces a wide area of knowledge, whilst in China the writings of the sages are the only books that the examinees are required to know. As these only deal with ethics and

questions as to how a country may be best governed, whilst mathematics, physics, and science in all its branches are utterly ignored, it will be easily seen how much inferior the graduates of China are to those who have gained their degrees in the West.

After he returned with his new honours, a still further improvement took place in the attitude of the picture of Phœnix Fairy. The face was so far turned that he now could catch the whole of it, and he could see the love that beamed out of her eyes, and the smile of happiness that suffused her beautiful face.

During the year of study that Liu had to go through before taking his final degree, the sweet face of his wife was the one source of inspiration to him, and sometimes, when the labour became so irksome that he fain would have given it up for a time and taken a long holiday, the shadow that came over it, and the look of pain that quenched the smile, always prompted him to new exertions and to a more determined purpose to further strenuous effort. Then indeed he got his reward, for the look of affection deepened, and the eyes flashed, and the smile became the sunniest that ever lit up any human countenance.

Often in the long nights during the midnight hours when drowsiness crept over him, and a feeling of utter weariness seemed to put despair into his heart, would there come a voice from the picture encouraging him to persevere and telling that the toil and sorrow would soon be over, and then they would be reunited and life would be one long dream of happiness, never to be broken again by any separation.

Never had a pure woman's love acted with such magic power as did that of Phœnix Fairy. She had played a truly fairy part in the way in which she had changed an erratic genius into a first-rate scholar, with a mind and a purpose that were to fit him to take a high place amongst the rulers of his country.

In the final examination Liu excelled all his previous efforts, and came out at the head of all the scholars that had entered for examination in the Imperial Academy for that

year. He entered the lists with fear and trembling and his courage would have utterly failed him had it not been for the magic influence that his fairy wife exercised over him in this supreme moment of his life.

Opening the case to have a last look at her, before he started for the Imperial Palace where the Dragon Emperor was to meet the candidates, with a start of surprise he noticed that the figure had turned quite round, and that now she was facing him. Her smiles, always beautiful, seemed ten times more so at this moment when his heart was so full of anxious fears. Tones too, distinct and audible, came from her lips, telling him that his long trial was over, and that to-day the greatest triumph in a scholar's life would be gained by him, and that he would come out the first of all the men that entered and gain the coveted title *chungyuan*.

No scholar can enter for the Hanlin examination unless he has successfully passed three previous ones. The men, therefore, that come up are the very pick of all the scholars in the empire. In this final competition, the man that comes out first is crowned with the title of *chungyuan*, and he becomes the famous man of the year. His name is flashed throughout the length and breadth of the land by telegraph, by couriers, and by the thousand mysterious ways that the Chinese have of transmitting news to the remotest corners of the empire, and it is posted up in all the literary guilds, and in almost every school and private study of the students and scholars of the eighteen provinces.

The prophecies of his beloved wife had come true, and when his name was posted up as the *chungyuan* of the year he felt that, now that he stood upon the highest rung of the ladder of fame, it was entirely due to her influence that his life had not turned out a failure instead of a brilliant success. Opening the case to look at the beautiful face of Phœnix Fairy, he started back in amazement to find that the figure had vanished and only an empty frame stared him in the face.

Whilst he was perplexed and in distress a light touch on his arm caused him to look around and there, standing close by him, was his wife. "Our sorrows are over now" she

said; "we have both suffered. You have had to endure toil and weariness of study, whilst I have had to bear the misery I felt in being separated from you. Now that is all over and we never need be parted from each other again."

From that time the lives of both ran smoothly. Liu rose to high office in the service of the Government, where he was distinguished not only for his executive ability, but also for the honesty and purity with which he carried out his official duties.

XII.

MR. TANG, THE FILIAL SON.

In one of the hilly regions in the famous province of Hunan, there lived a farmer who, with his only son Tang, cultivated the few fields that had come down to him from his fathers. The farm was a very unproductive one, for it was situated on the slope of a hill, and the soil was thin, and continued crops of stones, that constantly recurred no matter how often they were picked up and cast on the road side, were the only ones that he was perfectly sure of gathering in at almost any season of the year.

The wonderful fertility of these fields in producing stones had been the marvel of all those who for generations had tilled them. Successive owners had diligently cleared the land, as they thought, of these indigestible products, but the next time they came to put the seed in, they found to their dismay that a fresh growth had arisen to usurp the place that the more legitimate crops were intended to occupy.

In addition to the trouble arising from the poor and scanty soil there was also the uncertainty of the weather to contend with. When the rains from heaven were abundant, just enough to meet the actual wants of the home could then be dragged out of the unwilling fields, but when these failed and the great, red-hot sun licked up every drop of moisture out of them with his fiery tongue, then famine would come sometimes and stare into the miserable shanty on the hillside where father and son lived out their lonely, wretched lives.

Such a lot as this is the experience of countless numbers of the masses of the people that make up the huge population of this vast empire. For them it is a stern struggle for bare existence, and in nothing does the solid character of the Chinese race come out more conspicuously than in the heroic patience with which they bear cheerfully and uncomplainingly

the strain of poverty and of toil that seems to be the warp and woof of their lives. It is no wonder that the Chinese farmer has got the reputation he has everywhere acquired of being able to touch the land with a kind of magic hand and to draw forth from the most barren and unpromising fields the liberal crops that are to sustain himself and his family. In soil that an English farmer would look upon with contempt, and that would for ever lie fallow in England, by infinite labour, and with a touch that nature responds to, he manages to draw out from it the crops that are to keep the home together.

Tang and his father were the only ones now left together. The mother had died and so had a sister and a brother. The stress of poverty had been too severe and food had been too scant, and the struggle with the fields that would have yielded enough for the support of the home if only the skies would have sent down a constant supply of rain, was so hard, that one after another laid themselves down in the bare and poverty-stricken cottage, and left the husband and son to work out the problem of how to keep body and soul together.

At last the father laid down his hoe for the last time, and Tang was left alone and solitary in the home where all the voices had ceased except his own, and the only sound that now could be heard were the cries of bitterness and agony that were wrung from his soul, at the loss of one whom he loved with all the passion of his heart.

The hoe mentioned here is the one standing instrument with which the farmer cultivates his fields in China, in fact with the poorer classes it is practically the only one that is employed. The richer farmers have the cow or the buffalo to plough their lands when they wish to prepare them for the seed, and they have harrows, but such men as Tang and his father do the whole of the farming by the aid of the hoe alone. It is a wonderful weapon is this same hoe, and in the skilful hands of the farmer, who has learned by long experience to know how to handle it, it becomes a mighty force in the production of the crops of every kind and description throughout the length and breadth of the country.

What the spade is to the navvy, the hoe is to the farmer and labourer in China, with this important difference, that this latter being really the only implement that the more indigent have to rely on as a means of getting a living, more ingenious ways of utilizing it have been discovered than have been with the spade.

The scene in the home of Tang was indeed a sad and a pitiful one. The hovel consisted of one large room about fifteen feet square. In two corners of it were two apologies for beds. They consisted simply of coarse planks laid on trestles, on the top of which was strewed some rice straw to disguise the hardness of the boards. An old cotton quilt lay tossed on each one, black with age and worn and tattered, showing the hard service they had both seen since years ago they were brought home from the nearest market town. The only articles of furniture in the room besides these were a rough, square table, two or three chairs, and the same number of stools. The floor was earthen and seemed rarely to have been swept, for dust and dirt abounded in every direction, but especially in the corners, where useless things were thrown with the indifference of the Chinese to neatness and tidiness. There was an utter absence of everything like comfort, and no attempt had been made by the dwellers in this wretched abode to add in the slightest degree to the home feeling of the place.

And now the father lay dead, worn out with the incessant toil that was necessary to meet the daily wants of the home and by the meagre fare that had been gradually sapping his system, bringing on premature decay. The son, Tang, was a fine specimen of the young manhood of China. He was a well-formed, handsome-looking fellow and would have attracted the attention of even the most casual observer. He was, moreover, of a generous, loving disposition and had gained the admiration of the other dwellers on the hillside, who had been touched by his unselfishness and by his readiness to oblige whenever anyone was in need of his services.

He was now in the greatest distress of mind at the death of his father, to whom he had always been devotedly

attached. He could not bear to think that every member of the home had been taken away, and that he should be left alone in the dreary cottage with none to speak to him or to comfort him. The idea of getting married was entirely out of the question, for he had not a cash with which to bless himself, and as for getting the hundred dollars that would be required to pay for the dowry of the bride, that sum was as much beyond the power of his obtaining as the moon would be if he had had any designs upon it.

The pressing difficulty, however, just now was the question of how he should bury his father. There was not a coin in the house, and without a certain amount of cash he could not go to the coffin shop in the adjacent market town and hope to get a coffin in which to lay the dead. He could not buy on trust, for he had no property that could be held as a guarantee that the cost of the coffin would ever be paid in the future. He did not dare to attempt to borrow from his neighbours, for they were all in nearly the same predicament as himself. Money was scarce. They had a certain amount of corn and potatoes that they had gathered from their fields for home consumption; but cash, the current coin of the realm, was conspicuous by its absence, in all the farmers' houses where Tang would have had a chance of borrowing enough to provide for the funeral of his father.

In this dilemma he thought of an expedient that showed the noble character of the man, and also the profoundly filial spirit with which he was animated.

Closing the door of the cottage where his father lay, he proceeded to a large and thriving mansion, where a rich man lived. Seeking an interview with him, he told him his story and offered, if he would advance him enough to bury his father, to become his slave for life, and faithfully work for him as long as he lived.

Fortunately the wealthy man was endowed with a generous spirit and was touched by the devotion of the young fellow who stood with a modest and yet manly air before him. He was also influenced by the fact that for a mere nominal sum he would secure the services of a hardy worker and one who, humanly speaking, would be able to

serve him for many a long year to come. Moved by this double motive the rich man agreed to advance the money that would be enough to bury the old man in one of his own fields and to secure him a roughly-cut stone to place at the head of the grave so that his name might be remembered in the future when, perhaps, the son had passed away from the earth, and the neighbours had lost all memory of his existence.

A document was drawn up stating, in legal phraseology, that Tang had sold himself to be a life-long slave to so-and-so; that his identity might never be questioned, his hand blackened with Indian ink was impressed upon the paper, so that in case of any possible dispute hereafter he himself should stand as witness against himself. The amount that had been agreed upon was handed over to Tang, who gave his father a royal burial, a thing most dear to every Chinese, and he then loyally returned to his master, to become his slave as long as he lived.

This primitive and impressive method of drawing up and signing a document where a man is sold into slavery is very common in nearly every province of China. It is also used when a parent takes his little daughter to be sold as a slave into some rich family. The hand of the father or the mother is blackened with ink, and whilst wet it is laid upon the white paper, where an exact impression of it is thus taken.

Any contract that might be simply written could be possibly disputed in the future, for Chinese law is apt to be influenced by the bribes that the mandarins are so willing to accept, so that the tightest bond can always be snapped. The impress of the hand, however, is something that cannot be so easily disputed, and in fact never is.

The first duty that was set to the enslaved son was the task of looking after the extensive gardens, which were famous throughout the entire region. In this work, for which Tang had never had any special training, he disclosed such taste and such ingenuity in the cultivation of the beautiful flowers with which the rich man had stocked his grounds, that the owner of them was filled with delight that

he had obtained such a genius as his own property and that he need never fear that he should be deprived of him in the future.

In the meantime, the conduct of Tang in his willingness to deprive himself of his liberty, in order to secure that his father should receive an honourable burial, had excited the wildest admiration wherever the story had been told. It turned out, however, eventually that it was a theme that had been discussed far beyond the limits of human life, and that the fairies were as much enamoured of this splendid exhibition of filial piety as the mortals around him had been, and even more so.

It is a theory amongst the Chinese that fairies are not content to confine their sympathies to the members of their own race only, but have a lively interest in the heroic efforts of men, from whom they have all originally sprung. It is their hope that one day all men by the exercise of the virtues shall gradually emerge from the strife and struggle of life and find themselves members of the Western Heaven, where they shall forever be freed from the trials and temptations of this mortal life. They were, therefore, specially delighted when they witnessed the splendid sacrifice that Tang had made of himself, and loud were their congratulations amongst themselves that there seemed to be another mortal that had taken such a long stride towards the realms of immortality.

A number of them felt so strongly on the subject that they decided that they should do something practical to show their appreciation of his conduct, and they met in council to deliberate what steps should be taken. It was considered that as Tang was now a slave it was highly improbable that he would ever have the means of purchasing a wife, or that if his master out of pity provided him with one she would be a woman of low degree, and quite unfit to mate with a man of such distinguished virtue as Tang. It was accordingly decided that one of their number named Flower should descend to earth and become his wife. This she at once consented to do, and she began her preparations to leave her home in the Western Heaven and to take upon herself the form and appearance of an earthly being.

One day Tang was busy amongst his flowers, when he was astonished to see a young lady walking leisurely from flower to flower and plucking the most beautiful ones she could find amongst them. Approaching her with great deference, he very gently and politely informed her that these flowers belonged to his master, who, he had no doubt, would be highly pleased to let her have as many as she wished if she would only apply to him. He was very strict, he said, about people plucking them without his consent, and if she would only allow him to conduct her into his presence, he was quite sure that he would give her permission to take her choice amongst the finest specimens in the whole of the gardens.

This she consented to do, and Tang led her up to the great house, where they were met at the door by the only daughter of the rich man, who started with amazement when she beheld a young lady magnificently dressed and of a most refined appearance, and more beautiful than any woman that she had ever beheld in all her life. She invited her to come in and, taking her into a private room, she looked at this mysterious stranger for an explanation of her visit.

Flower at once proceeded to explain that she was a fairy and that she had just arrived from the Western Heaven on a commission that she had been deputed to carry out. The girl, whose name was Pearl, opened her eyes wide with wonder when she realized that the beautiful woman in front of her was one of those mysterious beings that the Chinese often talk about, but who are rarely visible to mortal eyes. She listened with rapt attention as Flower explained how the fairy world had been greatly moved by Tang's self-sacrifice, and how, in order to reward him for his noble devotion to his father, they had agreed that she should be deputed to descend to the earth and become his wife. "I hope," she said, "that you will use your influence with your father to get him to consent to this arrangement, for not only will Tang be benefited by it, but your home will feel the effect of my presence, and prosperity will fill every heart with contentment."

The romance of the affair had a powerful attraction for Pearl, who, quite independent of any advantage that was

likely to come to the home, was strongly inclined to go in heartily for the scheme of the fairies. There was an air of mystery, too, about the whole business. The idea of having a real fairy living together with them, with all the possibilities of strange adventures and miraculous exhibitions of power, had a fascination for her that at once enlisted her sympathies and her hearty co-operation.

When the rich man was consulted in the matter, and after he had seen Flower and had grasped the idea that she laid before him, he gave his most hearty consent, and in a few days the marriage was carried out amidst the greatest possible rejoicings and with feastings to which half the country side were invited. If Tang had been his son he could not have been more lavish in his expenditure, and everyone felt that, whilst he had been willing to sacrifice much in selling himself into slavery, he had certainly been amply rewarded in the royal entertainment that had been got up for him, and in the possession of a wife to whom there was no equal for beauty in all the country side.

At the end of a year a little son was born to Flower that seemed to make the happiness of the home complete, for a more perfect wife than she could not be found anywhere. Her self-denial in leaving the Western Heaven and living under human conditions had been loyally carried out by her, but now that she could leave a son with Tang to perpetuate his name and to make him feel that he was not alone in the world, she considered that her work was done, and that she was quite at liberty to drop her rôle as a mortal and resume the position she had voluntarily abandoned at the request of her fellow immortals.

One day, handing over the little infant to Tang, she said, "I am now going to return to the Western Heaven, for I consider that the special service I was commissioned to perform has been accomplished. I am a fairy as you have always known and, though for a time I have taken the form of a woman and have striven to do my duty to you as a wife, my home is far off and I must hasten back to it. I would advise you now to marry one of your own kind who will keep your home after I am gone, and who will care for your little

son. Pearl is deeply in love with you and would make you an excellent wife. Her father, I think, would have no objections to your becoming his son-in-law, and so I advise you to marry her. As for me you will never see me again," and even as she was uttering these last words, her form became shadowy and indistinct, and when Tang would have put out his hand to detain her she was gone, and every trace of her had vanished.

As the fairy had discovered, Pearl, from the very first day in which Tang had come into their home, had lost her heart to him, and now that the astounding news had flashed through the house that the fairy had disappeared never to return, her heart bounded with delight, and a great hope sprang up in it that after all she might be able to be wedded to him. Chinese propriety, however, forbade that she should utter a thought on this delicate subject, for in this land of China the settling of marriage is left to the friends, whilst the young man and the girl must be content to stand by speechless whilst arrangements that are to affect the whole of their lives are left to other hands to arrange.

The female members of the household had, however, long seen Pearl's ill-disguised affection for Tang, and they all believed that a marriage between the two would be the most admirable thing possible. Tang was of such a generous, manly spirit that he had gained the affection of the whole household. It is true he was a slave and socially far below the position that Pearl occupied. Still, he was not an ordinary slave who had been bought in the market and who had the low, debased feelings that such men usually have. His being a bondservant was the source of the highest honour to him, and his having become so was the theme of admiration amongst the dwellers in the Western Heaven. He had a son, too, that was born of a fairy and any woman that could claim the privilege of calling him her son would indeed be a happy one, for honours and wealth were sure to be showered upon the house to which he belonged. With these feelings in the minds of all in the home, the marriage of Pearl with our hero was a thing that was easily accomplished. No delay was needed, for there was no mourning required for

a dead wife, and etiquette was not called in to decide how long the bereaved husband should remain single before he took another partner to preside over his household.

And now once more, the home of the rich man resounded with the sounds of laughter and rejoicing. The marriage festivities were on an unusually splendid scale. A year ago they were considered to be specially fine, but now they surpassed anything one had ever dreamed of before. Of course, there was a reason for this. Last year it was the marriage of a dependent, but now, it was the bringing of a distinguished son-in-law into the family, who had been honoured by the notice of a heavenly visitor and whose name and virtues would shed lustre upon the home for many a generation yet to come.

The years went slowly by and the son of the fairy when he was old enough was sent to school. There happened just then to be a famous scholar who had settled in the neighbourhood, to whom the young lad was sent, in order to study the intricacies of the Chinese language, and to be initiated into the mysteries of the great books that every student has to master if would hope to attain to eminence in the empire. From the first, the lad showed that he was possessed of unusual abilities. He was a perfect genius in the way he absorbed learning and in the original thought he showed in grasping subjects that only men of unusually profound judgment would ever endeavour to grapple with. The result was that in the literary examinations he passed with the highest honours, and there was every promise that he would ultimately attain to the very highest positions in the gift of the state.

His teacher was so delighted with the success of his pupil that he confided his own history to him. He said, "You have never known that I am a fairy that has voluntarily come to earth in order to serve mankind. The fairies, you must know, have the good of the world laid upon them, and wherever they can see an opportunity of benefiting men they eagerly seize upon it, even though it may be at the cost of pain and suffering to themselves.

"The fairies are not the light-hearted creatures that they are often supposed to be, simply flying about on the mountain

slopes, or careering through valleys, and always planning amusements for themselves. Happy times they have in abundance, but it is mainly in their efforts to benefit the human race that they find their highest sources of enjoyment. It is for this reason that there are so many scattered throughout China at the present moment, all engaged in the noble effort to alleviate the sorrows of men, or to stimulate them to nobler and more unselfish lives than they could possibly live by any efforts of their own. It is this too that explains why your mother consented to come and live as a wife to your father, not simply that she might comfort him in his sorrow for the loss of his father, but that she might by her self-sacrifice induce others to imitate his noble example in love and devotion to their parents. My object too, in living here for years is to instil in the hearts of the youth of this neighbourhood a love for learning such as shall give them noble ideas and qualify them to become leaders of thought in the government of their country."

The young scholar was deeply moved by the revelation that this distinguished teacher had just made to him, and he felt his heart drawn to him not only because he had so successfully led him along the road of scholarship but also because he realized that they were of a kindred race, and had things in common that not merely mortal man could dare to aspire to. He expressed his delight at the wonderful news he had given him, and he asked him if he would assist him in the one great purpose of his life and that was to discover where his mother was. Latterly he had had an intense longing to see her, but he could think of no plan by which this purpose could be accomplished.

The teacher replied that he had a number of books in his possession that he thought by a reckoning that was familiar to him, the secret of where she was and what form she had assumed would be revealed to him. A few days later, he called the young student into his study, and he said to him, "I have worked out the problem you gave me the other day, and I have found that Flower is now in the neighbourhood of a certain lake not far from here, and that she has taken the shape of a crane. I advise you at once to go

to the border of the lake and watch the passage of these birds. You will soon observe that seven of these fly in a flock and keep company with each other. They are all fairies and one of them is your mother. You will recognize her from the others, by the fact that she has one of her wings drooping, as though she had been wounded. She flies low too and as she passes by try and seize her. If you succeed in doing this she will not attempt to escape, but will reveal herself to you."

Full of joy and believing that he would soon have the inexpressible pleasure of seeing the mother whom he had long desired to behold, he hastened to the lake and took up his abode in a small cottage on the shore. After dawn he saw the white wings of a flock of cranes gleaming in the sun. They were flying in his direction, and breathless with nervous anxiety he soon saw that there were just seven, the number that his teacher had taught him to expect. One of them to his great joy had a drooping wing, and as it was flying low over his head he managed to grasp hold of it, at the same time crying out with a passionate voice, "Mother! Mother! Mother!" In an instant the crane was changed into a beautiful woman, with the form and features that had often been described to him by his father and by those who knew her years ago when she lived as the wife of Tang in the home in which he had been reared.

With a tender and loving voice she said, "My son, I may not stay with you, our destinies lie in different directions. You must work out your life on earth by a noble and strenuous manhood. I have passed through all the stages by which men become emancipated from the evils that press upon humanity, and now my energies must be devoted to assist in uplifting men and women who have within them the ambition to live a nobler life. I shall never, therefore, see you again after to-day, and do not attempt to seek me, for the search will be in vain."

She then gave him a golden gourd, telling him it would act as a talisman and save him from any great misfortune that might threaten him. He was to be sure, however, to remember that the charm would work only so long as he

kept his noble ideal before him, for its virtues would cease to exist the moment that he allowed the passions of his heart to influence and master him.

"Here is another one," she said, "that I also give you that you are to present to your teacher. He may possibly close his door and refuse you admittance when he knows that you are coming with it, for he is a fairy and he would understand whilst you were on your way the purpose for which you were coming."

With a look of ineffable sweetness, and one that lingered in his memory as long as he lived, the fairy mother vanished and not a trace of her was seen either in the air where she might have flown as a crane, or along the shore where everything was visible for miles.

Hastening away to fulfil his mission to the teacher, he found, when he arrived at his house, that the door was fast closed and bolted, and though he knocked loudly and long their seemed to be no one inside to open it. Seeing a little side window open he threw his gourd amongst the books that were the precious possession of his teacher, and that were lying about in all directions just as he was accustomed to have them when he was studying. No sooner had it touched them than an explosion took place and every book in the room was instantly in flames. Amongst them were the magic manuscripts by which it was possible to discover where his mother was. These in a few minutes were a mass of cinders, and so all possibility of discovering any trace of her whereabouts was entirely lost for ever.

This was precisely what Flower intended should be the case when she gave the golden gourd to her son with the minute directions as to how he was to employ it. His teacher mourned over the loss of his books, and he assured his pupil that not even he with all his knowledge of magic could ever again assist him in his search for his mother. The young man accepted this as final, and from this time he applied himself with such intensity to his studies that he rose to supreme eminence in the empire and was appointed to some of the highest posts in the service of the Government.

XIII.

SOAT-LIP AND THE YOUTHFUL FAIRY.

THE hero of this story was a Chinese scholar who had his home in the northern portion of the empire. His family was of a poor and humble origin, but in China that does not militate against a person's reputation in the very slightest degree. When a man by study and by his own personal ability has distinguished himself in the literary examinations, and has gained a high place amongst thousands of scholars with whom he has had to compete, no one ever dreams of looking down upon him because his father was a poor farmer with a few miserable fields, from which by incessant industry he dragged out a precarious existence for himself and his family.

China seems to be the one country in the world where education is made the measure of success, and a young fellow, no matter from what lowly position in society he may have risen, has the whole world of honours that state can give open before him, if he only satisfies the educational standard that is demanded.

Soat-Lip was a man of a charming disposition. Though he had risen from this lowly rank, there was a native refinement about him that was not solely the result of his studies, but was inherent in the very texture of the man. That a finer strain ran through him was manifest from the fact that he was a poet of no mean order. His thoughts and his vivid imagination were constantly carrying him beyond the dull grey fact of life around him, and he had caught visions of a world into which ordinary mortals had never dreamed of treading.

He had made many friends, mainly because of his naturally sweet and generous character, but none of these had been able to deliver him from the grinding poverty that rested upon him and his home, and there seemed no way by

which he could be delivered from the constant anxieties with which an inability to meet the necessities of his home daily oppressed him.

If he had only been a little more enterprising he could have easily made his way, for he was a scholar of no mean ability, and there were many rich men in the neighbourhood who would have been willing to have secured his services as tutor to their sons. He was of a shy, diffident disposition, however, and he shrank either from thrusting himself forward or from leaving his home, where he could indulge in the luxury of wandering in imagination into the regions of fancy and romance, and where he could catch fleeting visions of wondrous scenes that no mortal eye had ever gazed upon.

At last there came a change in the fortunes of his life that was to break in upon dreary monotony of a struggle for existence. One day a letter arrived from a distant province from an old student friend who was a county magistrate in an important city there, urgently inviting him to come and pay him a visit. He told him that he had long desired to see him, and, besides, he hoped from his official position in the county that he would soon find means of procuring some employment for him that would deliver him from all want in the future. In order to show that this invitation was not a mere matter of form but a real evidence of his affection for him, he sent him an order on one of the native banks for a good round sum to meet the expenses of his long journey across the country.

Soat-Lip was delighted with this proof of the friendship of his companion with whom he had spent many a pleasant day when they were studying together for their degree. It seemed indeed as though the clouds had at last lifted from his life and a new inspiration had been given to his thoughts. The only trouble was his mother, whose heart was struck with a chill as she thought of the hundreds of miles that would separate her from her beloved son, and of the possibility that she might never see him again. She would have much preferred to have gone on as they had been doing, even though the life they had been leading was one of great

privation, rather than be parted from the one human being in whom it might be said that her whole soul was entirely wrapped up.

The son, though he loved his mother dearly, and did not wish to be parted from her, felt that the chance in his life had come to him at last, and that his friend the mandarin would soon find some opening for him where he would be able to make enough money to enable him to support his mother in a better way than he had been able to do in the past, and he reasoned with himself that it would be highly culpable in him if he neglected to take advantage of it.

Accordingly, after making preparations for the long journey that lay before him, and after having made full inquiries as to the route by which he should travel, he one fine morning with a sad and sorrowful heart bade good-by to his mother, and turned his face in the direction of the region where his friend lived.

The latter had been so generous in supplying him with funds for his journey that he found he would not require them all, and so he was able to leave a nice little sum with his mother, to enable her to carry on until he could send her more from the distant home to which he was going.

After several weeks travelling Soat-Lip at length arrived in safety at his journey's end, and to his consternation and his horror he found, when he entered the yamên expecting a hearty greeting from his friend, that he had died a week or two ago and a new man had been appointed in his place.

Soat-Lip was stunned with this intelligence, for he found himself stranded in this far-off city with absolutely no means at his command. He had been so certain of being received and cared for by his friend that he had spent all the money that had been so generously sent him, and he was left with only enough cash in his pocket to meet the necessary expenses for food and lodging for the next week or so.

To a man of his easy-going temperament this was a trial that seemed for the moment as if it would crush him. In monetary matters he had never been accustomed to think for himself. His mother had done all this for him, but now he could not turn to her for consolation, for he was separated

from her by hundreds of miles, and he had not a single friend amidst the teeming crowds that jostled him on the streets that he could appeal to for assistance.

In this dilemma, the latent powers of the man, that had hitherto remained dormant within him, seemed to start into life. He must do something at once or in a few days he would be starving. He had never had such an urgent question as this to deal with before, for his mother, who was a woman of great resources of mind, had seen to it that the difficulties of housekeeping should never be laid upon him.

Wandering in the outskirts of the town and deeply engrossed with the thought as to how he should get employment, he came to the doors of a great temple where men and women were coming and going, evidently worshippers of the great god Tai Shen, that was enshrined within, and whose reported powers of protecting people in all the emergencies of life had drawn great numbers from far and near to its shrine.

Sauntering idly through its courts, and watching the worshippers who, with a business-like air, were burning their incense and tossing their divining rods in the air, Soat-Lip walked aimlessly around, his mind absorbed with the one perplexing question as to how he could get into some position where he could earn enough to keep body and soul together.

The divining rods above referred to are two articles that are used by the worshippers of idols to ascertain the will of the gods. These are made of shoots from a bamboo tree. After they have been cut off they are allowed to lie in the sun until they are quite dry. They are then cut in two longitudinally, one side being flat and the other round.

A pair of these always lies on the incense table in front of the idol, and after it has been appeased by an offering of incense or a string or two of paper ingots, these rods are deftly thrown into the air by the worshipper. As they come rattling to the ground, the will of the god is discovered from the position that these two pieces of bamboo have taken after they have fallen to the earth. If two flat sides appear uppermost, or two round ones, the offerer knows that the answer of the idol is unfavourable.

If, however, these should be one round and one flat side turned towards the roof he would realize that the answer was a favourable one. If he were of a persevering mind and determined to have his own way, he would continue to heave the rods in the air, until the god, wearied with his importunity, would finally give the required answer.

This never seems illogical or unreasonable to the Chinese worshipper. He thinks, as in ordinary life, that, when a person finally yields to the solicitations of a person, so the idol is moved by the insistency of the suppliant and grants his request. It is thus believed that the reply comes not from the accidental falling of the rods on the temple floor, but is a direct answer from the idol.

Soat-Lip was a pleasant, gentlemanly-looking young fellow, and had a face that won the attention even of the casual observer. An elderly priest with his shaven head and slate-coloured robe, who was moving about amongst the worshippers, observed him and touched by the magnetism of his person was led to study him more carefully.

He noticed that there was an anxious, worried look about him that seemed to make him oblivious to everything around him. He walked up and down amidst the groups that had collected to worship, but he saw nothing of what was going on, so absorbed was he in his own thoughts.

Coming up to him he remarked that he was evidently a stranger and had come to this place from a far-off region. They soon got into conversation and the young man, drawn by the sympathy of the priest, told him his story, and related how he had been stranded in this town without money and without friends, and without the means of returning to his home in a distant province. He was so distressed with this thought, he continued, that he had no eyes to see anything or thoughts to consider aught but his own miserable condition.

The priest, really sorry for the scholar, suggested that he might come and stay with him in the temple and do some copying for him. He could not give him any salary, he said, for the temple was too poor to allow of that, but he could give him his board and lodging as long as he liked to

remain with him, or until he could get some remunerative employment that would relieve him of his present anxiety. Soat-Lip was overjoyed at the proposal, and the priest, leading him to the rear of the temple, showed him a little room that he said he might consider his own as long as he might think it necessary to be a guest.

Several months went by and Soat-Lip was exceedingly happy as far as his immediate wants were concerned, but he was greatly distressed about his mother. She was very poor and would have to earn her living, for he knew that by this time the money he had left with her would be nearly expended. He saw no way of earning enough to enable him to make the long return journey that would have taken him home, and so many a sorrowful hour he spent in bemoaning the unhappy fate that prevented him from easing the lot of one whom he loved so dearly.

One beautiful morning in winter, when the snow lay thickly on the ground and the whole landscape sparkled under the rays of the sun that rode in an unclouded sky, Soat-Lip went for a walk through the country, tempted by the beauty of the scenery and anxious to dispel the gloomy thoughts that oppressed his mind, when he thought of his unlucky fortune and his inability to do anything for his mother.

Wandering carelessly along he passed through a small hamlet and was much struck by one house in it. Whilst he was looking at it, a young man with a most handsome and winning countenance came to the door, and, seeing him, courteously invited him to come in and rest awhile. Little did Soat-Lip dream that from this moment his fortunes were about to be changed, and that the shadows that had rested upon them for so long in the past were to be for ever lifted.

He found to his amazement when he entered the house that it differed very much from the ordinary run of Chinese dwellings, and was furnished in a style that only the very wealthiest in the land could have afforded. The walls were hung with the most exquisite draperies of silk and satin, whilst pictures by the most famous artists, which must have cost a great deal of money, gave the impression that the

owner of the house must be a man possessed of a very considerable fortune. There were signs too that he was a man of culture, for, as was quite unusual even in the house of the literati of China, books lay about conspicuously as though reading was a constant habit in this home. They were elaborately got up too, and were of the rarest and most expensive editions.

Soat-Lip, being a scholar, was greatly interested in this, and his eyes kindled with delight as he took up one volume after another with which he was familiar. There was one, however, amongst them that he had never seen nor even heard of before. Looking at the title he saw it was called "The Story of the Land of Fairies." It was lavishly illustrated with pictures of that unknown country, and the figures of fairies in every imaginable position and grouping crowded its pages. Turning to the young man, he said, "What a remarkable book this is, and how did you manage to get such a rare and fascinating edition."

The young man seemed to evade answering this question and politely asked Soat-Lip to be seated whilst they sipped the tea that a little slave girl had just brought in. Sitting and enjoying the delicious aroma of the fragrant Bohea they were drinking, their hearts seemed all the more drawn to each other, and before long Soat-Lip found himself telling the story of his life to this stranger that he had known only a few brief moments.

His young host showed such extreme sympathy in his strikingly beautiful face that he seemed compelled to confide in him his troubles and to tell him what distress of mind he was in at the present moment in being so far away from his home, without any hopes of earning enough to enable him to make the long journey that lay between him and his mother.

Whilst these two are chatting confidentially with each other, drinking the delicious Bohea, it may be well to explain that this is the name of one of the famous teas of China, and is so-called from the hill on which it grows. The Bohea hills are in the province of Fukien and lie fifty or sixty miles to the north-west of the city of Foochow, from which it is exported all over the world. It has a wide reputation in

China and is carried throughout the empire. It is sent also to the royal palace in Peking where it is received as one of the articles of tribute that it was settled long ages ago Fukien should render to the emperor. Bohea has always been a favourite with English tea drinkers, whilst, singular to say, the Americans prefer the stronger Oolong, which holds a lower place in the estimation of tea experts in China.

The Chinese when they take tea do not gather round a table as we do, and with milk and sugar flavour their tea to the required taste. Both of these latter never accompany the drinking of tea. A teapot is brought in with steaming tea, and a few diminutive cups that will hold only a mouthful are set down on a tray. The host as a matter of politeness pours out the first cup and offers it with both hands to the guest, who receives it standing and with the same ceremonious politeness.

Should he wish for more, he will simply get up and pour out for himself as many cups as he desires to drink. Tea comes in at odd times, when the weather is very hot and men are thirsty, or when a guest arrives, for then it is a matter of high ceremony that he shall hardly be seated before some one brings in the steaming tea and a cup is filled with the fragrant liquid. The Chinese are not tea drinkers in our sense and vast masses of them never see tea excepting at New Year's time, or at some of their feasts or festivals during the year.

After Soat-Lip had concluded his story, the young man, who had shown the most lively concern both by his attitude and by the emotions that swept over his very speaking countenance, said "But why do you not open a school? With your abilities and scholarship there are no reasons why you should not be able in the course of a year or so to lay up enough to enable you to return to your home. If you do not think it too much beneath you, take me as your pupil and come and live with us, and I guarantee that all your troubles will be at an end, and we will care for you as though you belonged to our own family.

"I must explain to you," he continued, "that my name is Hong Hu, and that we originally came from the province

of Shensi, where our home is. In consequence of a great misfortune we removed from there and for the time being we have taken up our residence here. My father is an old man, and I am sure will be ready to fall in with the plan I have suggested to you, for he has long wished to engage a scholar like yourself to continue my education, which through our troubles has been very much interrupted."

In a few minutes a white-haired old gentleman, full of dignity but with a most loving, gracious manner entered the room and began to thank Soat-Lip for his condescension in promising to teach his son, and he insisted that he should at once take up his abode with them and feel that he was no longer amongst strangers, but that he was really adopted into their family, where he should receive the same treatment as though he were one of his sons.

In such an abode of bliss Soat-Lip began to be pleasantly conscious that the burden that had so long oppressed him had rolled as it were off his shoulders; and now that he had the funds to send to the relief of his mother, he felt that life had assumed a totally different aspect.

In such happy circumstances did the education of Hong Hu commence. Soat-Lip found that he was a man of extraordinary mental powers, and that the mastery of the Chinese literature in which scholars were educated at that time presented no difficulties whatsoever to him. He never wearied in the fervent devotion to his teacher that he had manifested from the very beginning, and he never lost any of his affection for him. Not only had he enriched him with considerable presents of money, but he had also arranged a marriage for him with a beautiful cousin of his.

Soat-Lip was exceedingly happy in his new home, when one day Hong Hu came to him with a clouded face, and told him that he was going to leave this locality for ever, for circumstances had arisen that made it expedient for him to remove to a distant region, and that this would also involve his separation from him for an indefinite period.

"I should advise you," said he, "to return to your mother together with your wife, whilst I take the way that fate shall lead me. You need not, however, be troubled by

any fear of the long, weary road that lies between you and her. I wish you, therefore, to hurry up your preparations for departure as speedily as possible, for there are serious troubles before me and my family that I must as a matter of life and death avoid at all costs."

On the morrow, when everything had been packed up and had been laid in the open courtyard ready to be removed, Hong Hu, calling to Soat-Lip, asked him to come out with his wife. "You are now going to your mother," he said, "but will require a great deal of nerve to carry out the orders I have to give you. I want you, however, to have perfect faith in me, and no harm can possibly happen to you, but if you should disregard the directions I am going to give you, your life will be sacrificed and you will never see your ancestral home again. As for your wife, I have no fear, as she belongs to the same race as myself, and many a journey has she taken more perilous than the one you are going to make to-day."

Taking hold of the hands of each of them he sternly gave the command that on no account were they to open their eyes for an instant, for that would cause disaster and death to Soat-Lip at least. Having seen that this order was faithfully obeyed, in a loud, imperious voice he cried "Ascend," and in an instant like a flash of lightning that has gleamed across the sky they were rushing through space and, borne up by billows of air, were travelling at a rate that made it difficult for him to breathe.

Terrified by the danger that had been threatened him if he dared to look out for an instant upon the weird scene through which they were being shot, Soat-Lip had sufficient command over his nerves not to lose his presence of mind, and hardly had he time to realize the supreme danger in which he was placed, when the same commanding voice exclaimed "We have arrived," and feeling the touch of earth under his feet, he opened his eyes and found himself with his wife and all his belongings in the courtyard of his old home. Hong Hu, however, had vanished and not a trace of him was to be seen, though Soat-Lip made anxious search for him in all the region around about.

The delight of the mother may easily be imagined when she saw her son, whom she had long mourned, actually standing in her presence with his beautiful wife, shy and nervous-looking, as though doubtful of the reception she was going to receive from her mother-in-law. Any fears, however, that the young wife might have entertained were soon dissipated by the warmth of the greeting that was given her, and by the tender look of love that was flashed upon her and her husband by the delighted mother.

Soat-Lip now, having ample means at his command, devoted all his leisure time to the prosecution of his studies. He was so successful in these that he took his degree of Master of Arts with honours, and in time was appointed a mandarin. Honours and wealth seemed continually to be thrust upon him, and now the only regret in his life was that his dear friend Hong Hu, to whom he traced all his prosperity, had so completely vanished out of his life that there was no trace left by which he could ascertain whither Hong had disappeared.

Walking along the road one day he saw a man on horseback approaching him. There was something so familiar about his appearance that he was startled, and waiting for his coming up he discovered to his great joy that it was the long lost Hong Hu, for whom he had mourned for several years.

Whilst he was expressing his delight and his unbounded joy at once more meeting with him, Hong Hu, with fear and terror printed on his countenance, told him in hasty words that he and his whole family were in the most deadly peril. "We are fairies, as you know ere this," he said, "and certain demons who have a grudge against us have plotted to destroy us, and unless you come to our assistance we shall all perish."

Soat-Lip declared that his life and all that he had were at Hong's disposal and that he had but to show him how he could serve him, and he would shed the last drop of his blood to prove his devotion. Dismounting from his horse, Hong Hu expressed his thanks and told him that in a few minutes his courage would be put to a severe test, for his enemies were already on their way to endeavour to destroy

him "and with his death your whole family will become their victims, and every member of it, including even your wife, who is one of our clan, will be exterminated."

"Take this sword," he said, "and hold it high in the air and strike whatever comes near you. Only swerve not and show no fear, for to do that would mean death to yourself as well as to us."

He had hardly done speaking, when the sky became suddenly darkened with dense masses of clouds that seemed to be flying in terror before some great tornado that was blowing behind them. The lightning flashed and the thunders crashed on high as though the world were coming to an end, when all at once, out of the commotion and from amidst the horrible darkness that prevailed, there seemed to rush out a figure darker than the gloom from which it emerged. It made straight for Soat-Lip as though it would overwhelm him and crush him out of existence.

Forwarned by Hong Hu, he held his ground with unflinching bravery, and striking out with his sword he felt a terrible shock that flung both Hong Hu and himself to the ground. When he came to himself once more, he found his friend lying on the ground, pale and stricken and apparently lifeless, but after a little he sat up and examining himself he found that beyond the shock of the onslaught of his inveterate foes he had received no damage whatsoever.

The sky too by this time was serene and clear, and the sun as though in congratulation of their escape was filling the heavens with his beams, and was causing the hills and the wide-spreading landscape to be filled with a glory that seemed to make them belong to a fairy world rather than this.

Hong Hu soon parted with Soat-Lip, telling him that his destiny lay elsewhere and that probably he should never see him again, and thanking him warmly for the service he had rendered him. From this time forward happiness and prosperity were the lot of the latter and for many years he lived a happy life with his fairy wife, his only regret being that he could not have the company of his well-beloved friend and benefactor Hong Hu as well.

XIV.

THE KING OF THE NINE MOUNTAINS.

In the county of Eternal Spring in the province of the Western Mountains, there lived in early days a scholar of the name of Li. He was a wealthy man, for considerable property had been handed down to him from his forefathers. He was, moreover, a man of more than average ability and had so far distinguished himself that, in the examination for B.A., he had easily come out the very first in the list of those who had been able to obtain this coveted degree.

This fact will not be disputed when it is remembered that the examinations for B.A. are held in the prefectural city, and as many as ten thousand undergraduates will sometimes come up from the various counties in it to be examined by the Imperial Examiner, who comes round once in three years to meet the candidates who are anxious to obtain their degrees. The number of these latter is limited, not more than one in a hundred being allowed to pass. The possession of this title gives a man a literary standing that places him at once amongst the gentry of the country, and qualifies him to take office in the Government service.

Li was a man, however, of a mean and sordid disposition, and instead of keeping up the family reputation by a wise and liberal use of his money he was so miserly that he allowed the ancestral mansion to fall into ruins, whilst he occupied a miserable shanty on the borders of the land which had been left him by his fathers. His spirit too was contemptible and he was wanting in that large and liberal way of looking at men and things that a mind cultured such as his was, and imbued with the noble sentiments that he had learned in the works of the sages, should have been able to do.

One day an old man came to him and said he was going to remove into his neighbourhood, and as it was difficult to obtain a house that would be suitable, he proposed renting

the old family home from him, and offered to pay him a hundred taels annually for the use of it.

The Chinese in those early days made the tael the standard currency of the realm. The word means an ounce, and whenever spoken about in commercial matters means an ounce of silver, which latter is made into ingots and used in buying and selling. These ingots are lumps of silver, made in the shape of a horse-shoe, and usually contain several ounces each.

They can be broken up into smaller pieces at any time when necessary, and the value of each is ascertained by being weighed in the scales. For common use the copper cash is in universal circulation, and for everyday purchases the ingot has to be changed at the cash shop, before being utilized.

In modern times the Mexican dollar is largely used along the coast and in the Treaty Ports, but when one travels far into the interior one has to carry ingots of silver, which can easily be converted into cash at any of the numerous banks that abound in every large city.

Li at first declined the offer and explained that the house he spoke of was really in a most dilapidated condition and quite unfit for anyone to live in. After some little further conversation, during which the old man informed him that he knew all about the condition of the house, but that he was still prepared to rent it for the sum he had mentioned, Li finally agreed, though he had his suspicions that everything was not all right, and that the old gentleman had some motive for taking a house that was positively uninhabitable.

The next day, the villagers were greatly excited by seeing a splendid procession of horses and carriages that passed along the main street. There were young men riding on the horses and what appeared to be the families were seated in the carriages. There was something very much out of the ordinary in the appearance of this striking cavalcade. That they were Chinese both in looks and in dress was quite manifest, but there was an air of distinction about them that proclaimed them to belong to society that was far superior to any that existed in that part of the country.

The young men sat on their horses with a dignity that would have suited them had they been Princes of the Blood, whilst the women, both young and old, looked as though they had recently come out of a palace. The horses too were of a breed that evidently betokened a high lineage. They were sleek and well fed, and they champed their bits and tossed their heads in the air, and seemed to realize that they were different from the scarecrows that were working in the fields, and which appeared to cast sidelong glances of envy at them as they pranced by.

In wonder and amazement the villagers hastily collected to see this remarkable sight. The women gathered in knots to gaze upon it, and mothers picking up their babies stood at their doors, and with a strange look in their eyes and mouths wide open with astonishment they remained spell-bound whilst the grand possession moved by. A number of men impelled by curiosity followed close in the rear to see where it was going to, and people could hardly believe their eyes when they saw it proceed steadily on till it entered the old ruined house that had been rented from the scholar Li. Without any stoppage, and without the faltering of a step, the horses with their riders, and the carriages with their brilliant occupants, as well as the numerous attendants that followed on foot, behind, entered within the grey and ruined walls, just as though they had passed through the noble archway of some great castle, and were being received with all due ceremony in the spacious courtyard by the Governor.

The sight was so amazing that the crowd ran in the wildest excitement to the shanty where Li lived and asked him who these grand people were that has just entered in such style and with such magnificence the ruined home of his fathers. He was mightily astonished when he was told what a splendid procession of equipages had just disappeared within its walls. "I never heard a sound," he declared, "of horses' feet and was quite unaware that anything whatever had been taking place such as you are talking about."

It was then remembered by the knowing ones, which in their amazement at the time they had not noticed, that no

sound had proceeded from the horses' feet and no crunching of the gravel on the roads had been produced over it, and so, of course, it was impossible that Li should have heard the sounds that on ordinary occasions would have aroused the deepest sleeper from his slumbers.

Hurrying out with the crowd that had been growing all the time, in the direction of the dilapidated house, he pointed out to them that they must certainly be mistaken, for no signs of horses' hoofs could be detected on the soft grass of the grounds outside the house, and no carriage ruts had made a single indentation in the loamy soil of which they were composed. When they reached the old forsaken home and rushed in with wonder in their eyes to look for the procession that only a minute or two before had swept by in such proud array, they could not find a single trace of it.

The old house had evidently never been disturbed. The rank grass still grew about the main entrance and forced its long green leaves through the crevices of the great slabs of stone with which the courtyard was paved. Climbing vines crawled up the walls and seemed to be playing hide-and-seek through the stone windows that gave a dim light to the rooms within. Great bloated spiders, that spun their long trailing webs and let them fly like streamers from the blackened rafters, revelled in their undisturbed possession of the gloomy chambers. If would seem indeed as though nature had taken up her abode where men should have lived, and with her usual industry was working out her plans and filling the house with signs of her handiwork.

By and by the crowd dispersed, sullen and discontented, for the scholar had jeered at them because of their folly and declared that they had all been dreaming and that the horsemen and the carriages and the gay troupes of men and women existed only in their imaginations. This was hard to bear, for the whole village had seen them, and it was impossible to be conceived that so many people in broad daylight should have with one consent declared that they had seen something which after all had no existence in fact.

There was no denying that the old house into which a number of people had seen the splendid cavalcade enter and

disappear from their gaze was absolutely empty when they entered in search of them. There were no signs that the place had been disturbed by any visitors, but was in precisely the same condition that it had been in for several years.

A week or two later after this strange occurrence, the old gentleman who had rented the house from Li paid him a visit and asked him if he would not do him the honour of making a call upon him. "I have been rather remiss," he said, "in doing my duty to you. I have really been so busy in repairing and enlarging the house that I could not possibly come earlier. The building you know was in a very dilapidated condition and required a vast amount of renovating to make it habitable for my large family. All the necessary work, however, I am glad to say, has been completely finished, and I shall be happy if you will come and take pot luck with us to-morrow at noon, when my son who has come of age, and for whom we are making a party, will be happy to entertain you."

On the next day at the appointed time Mr. Li made his way towards his old ancestral home, wondering how it was going to be transformed, so that it should be made fit to become the residence of a wealthy family. As he drew near he was astonished at the amazing change that in some mysterious way had been effected in it. He had never seen any signs of builders or masons about it, and no workmen were known to have been engaged to rebuild and beautify the tumble-down, old building, and yet here was a mansion that was suited for a mandarin of high rank.

Everything was as new looking as though it had only been furnished yesterday. Li could hardly believe his eyes as he looked upon the magnificent pile that rose in such stately grandeur before him, and all this had been accomplished in the course of a few days. It was, however, when he entered the building that his astonishment reached its extreme limit. He found that everything that art or money could supply existed in the greatest luxuriance within its walls. In the outer courtyard there were the rarest flowers that China could produce in full bloom, and ready to catch

the attention of the visitor, both by their beauty and by the exquisite fragrance that they diffused throughout the house. Every room, too, seemed a perfect museum of the choicest collection that some connoisseur had gathered from all parts of the empire to beautify and adorn the home. There were scrolls hanging on the walls painted by the most famous artists, depicting some of the famous historical scenes that happened in the distant past. There were also the choicest vases made in the potteries of Kingtehchen, with that beautiful blue colour that only the workmen there know how to produce. There were also tables and chairs of the famous ebony wood that the Cantonese workmen make with such patience and matchless skill.

Turn where he would his eye was rivetted on some special gem that had been brought from a distant province to add to the luxuriance of the rooms. Silken fans from Soochow, embroidered in the most delicate colours, and satin screens from Hangchow that artistic hands had covered with five-clawed Dragons and with figures of fairies, gave a lightness and a grace to the rooms in which they were placed. Then there were jade stones of the purest green, worth the ransom of a king, placed promiscuously about as though they were the commonest stones that could be picked up for a trifle in some jeweller's shop, and here and there were delicate lacquer trays, with willow trees of feathery branches that seemed to be bending to a summer's breeze, on which were placed tiny cups that would hold but a mouthful, and delicate brown tea-pots resting beside them, ready to draw out the fragrance of the tea such as no commoner ones would have done.

The reception that Li received was a right hearty and royal one. The eldest son, whose birthday was being celebrated, came to the door to receive him, and with courtly grace he led him into the guest chamber and placed him in the seat of honour. He was astonished to find what a large household it was that was occupying the old deserted mansion where his father once had lived. Servants dressed in uniform flitted about in considerable numbers carrying out the orders of their superiors. Occasionally he could hear the merry,

silver laugh of young women and the footsteps of little children gambolling about in the spacious passages. From a rough estimate of the persons he caught glimpses of and the different voices that he heard, he calculated that there could not be fewer than fifty or sixty people, old and young, that made up the membership of this wonderful household.

After some time spent in conversation, a servant came and announced that dinner was ready. Li was led to the seat of honour and was treated with the most marked politeness and respect. It is needless to say that the feast that had been prepared was such as he had never seen in all his life before. He had read indeed of royal dinners, and how the delicacies of China as well as those of lands that lay beyond the control of the Dragon Throne had been brought together to grace the table of the Emperor. The accounts seemed as though they had been written by some romancer, who had let fling his imagination in order to excite the wonder of his readers.

Here, however, the very things that he had imagined belonged to dreamland were actually set before him and he was partaking of them. As each course was brought on by the silent-footed servants, he was more and more amazed at the rareness of the delicacies that these well-trained men laid with such deftness on the table. There were shark's fins that had once cleaved in the waters of the Formosa Channel, and there was *bêche-de-mer*, crisp and appetizing to the taste, that had grown on the reefs in the Southern Pacific. There were ducks, too, that had been specially fed until they had grown so fat that some time before they had been killed they had not been able to move, but were given their food and water by persons engaged for this purpose. Dish after dish came and each contained a surprise that made the mouth water and stimulated the appetite for further gastronomic efforts. There were lily seeds boiled in sweetened, fragrant waters, and pigeon eggs floating unbroken in a delicious soup in which they had been prepared for the table. The one article in the menu, however, that aroused the most attention was the birds' nest soup. The nests had been collected by adventurous hunters in the island of Borneo

from huge caves in which the swallows build their nests. They are considered a great delicacy simply because of their rarity, as in themselves they are exceedingly insipid and flavourless.

At last, after thirty courses had tested the powers of the guests, the final dish that concludes every great feast was brought in, and then they knew that their banquet would soon be at an end. This consisted of bowls of rice, without which no feast would be considered to be complete throughout this land of China. It was amusing to watch the eagerness with which each one fingered his chopsticks and applied himself with gleaming eyes to the huge white-grained rice that lay like a snow-capped hill in the basin before him. It would have seemed from the energy with which it was attacked that the four long hours that had been spent in disposing of the delicacies that had composed the feast had been utterly misspent, and now at length some proper food was being eaten that would appease the hunger that had been growing upon them.

One would naturally have concluded that such generous treatment as had been accorded to Li would have filled his heart with feelings of gratitude and respect, but that was not so. The sight of all the rare and precious treasures that adorned the house, and the royal feast that had been set out with a luxuriance that would have honoured a king, seemed to inflame within him the wildest and the meanest of passions, and he made a solemn vow that he would set fire to this beautiful mansion and if possible burn every soul within it. He accordingly went to the nearest market town and ordered a vast quantity of sulphur and other deadly combustibles, and had them secretly bestowed away out of sight in various parts of the building.

When his deadly and murderous plans had been completed, he managed one day with the help of some men that he had let into the secret to set fire to the house. The wind was blowing a gale at the time, and this, aided by the fiery materials that a touch of fire would send into a blaze, soon wrapped the place in sheets of flame, that in their wild fury seemed to mount up to the very heavens. There was no

possibility of any escape from the burning building for those who were inside it. The screams and cries from the wretched inmates were pitiable in the extreme, but Li looked on with perfect complacency, for he considered that it was not men of his own flesh and blood that were being destroyed. He therefore allowed the fire to burn on until the house had been destroyed and apparently every soul in it had been burned to death.

The next day the old gentleman who had rented the house from him and who had been away from home when the tragedy took place came and upbraided him for his cruelty in destroying the members of his family. "You had no real cause of quarrel with me," he said, "I never injured you in any way, and I paid you a liberal rent for the house that was falling to pieces and which you could not by any possibility make any use of as a dwelling-place for your own household. Why then plan so deliberately for the destruction of so numerous a family as mine was? I can only assure you that I shall inflict a terrible revenge upon you, and as you have brought desolation and sorrow upon those whom I loved better than life, so in like manner the day is not far distant when not only you shall miserably perish, but the whole of your clan, young and old, shall be swept off the face of the earth." With these ominous words the old man instantly vanished from his presence, and though Li made vigorous efforts to trace him, in order that he might wreak his vengeance on him for the threats he had uttered, no traces of him could ever be discovered, though the most diligent investigations were made as to his whereabouts.

A whole year went by and still the sorrows threatened by the old man had not fallen upon the scholar. It seemed, indeed, as though additional prosperity had been thrust upon him. His investments had all turned out exceedingly well, and he found that his wealth had been materially increased so that he was one of the richest men in all the country side. His lands too had been unusually productive. The rains had fallen with great regularity and the crops had been better than they had been for at least ten years. Everything that he touched seemed to prosper with him, and the weird

denunciations of coming calamity, that had been hurled against him by the man whom he had so terribly injured, began slowly to fade away from his recollection.

Just about that time the region in which he lived began to be disturbed by frequent insurrections amongst the people, and bands of lawless men gathered in various quarters to organize armed opposition to the Government. The spirit of disaffection spread so rapidly that before many weeks had passed more than forty thousand men were in arms and were ready to assume the offensive against the local authorities.

Li was in great distress, for he had extensive property, and he was afraid that if the disturbances spread and the Government did not take immediate steps to suppress the rebellion he might possibly lose all that he had and his family suffer extermination as well. Just at this particular time, it was rumoured that a famous wizard had taken up his abode in the nearest market town, and it was said by those who had consulted him that his knowledge of the future and his power to pry into the secrets of the other world far excelled anything that had ever appeared in China.

Li, anxious to know what the coming days had in store for him, got into his sedan-chair and, accompanied by his private secretary and a retinue suitable to the position he held in society, he started off for the office of the famous soothsayer in the hopes that he might disclose some way in which he might avert the disasters that he feared were coming upon him.

When he entered he was surprised to find a man in the very prime of life, with a face full of intelligence, and to judge by appearance with a mind of a far higher order than that possessed by an ordinary fortune-teller. Ordering his attendants to remain outside and gently closing the door behind him, he came up to Li and in a low, mysterious voice, he whispered, "I have been waiting for you. I knew," he continued, "by certain signs that you were coming to consult me, and I began at once to work out your horoscope before you arrived. I have been greatly moved by the momentous changes that I see are going speedily to happen in your life. Do you know," he murmured in a low tone, "that I have

discovered by occult art that you are the real heir to the crown and that you should be sitting on the Dragon Throne instead of the man that now occupies it?"

The horoscope plays an important part in the life of nearly every Chinese. In the case of every child that is born in this land, there are four things that are at once registered as of vital importance in many of the dealings in which it may be concerned in the future. These are the hour, the day, the year when the birth took place, and also the animal, that was the presiding genius, if one might call it, for that particular year.

The Chinese believe that there are twelve animals that are used for the characters of the cycle of twelve years. These are the rat, cow, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, fowl, dog, and pig. They are used in common life to indicate the year in which a man is born. In taking the horoscope of a man and woman who are going to be betrothed to one another, it is of prime importance to know under what animals they were born. If the man, for example, were born under the tiger and the woman under the goat, negotiations would at once be dropped, for life to the woman at least would soon become intolerable. How could it be imagined for one moment that a tiger and a goat could live in unity with one another! The tiger would soon make an end of the goat, and there would be a tragedy in the family.

If, on the other hand, the man had been born under the cow or the horse there would be no reason why the marriage contract should not be drawn up at once. If a man born under the tiger were mated with a lady born under the dragon, it would be considered quite proper, for it is believed that the two opposing influences would be so thoroughly matched that no disastrous results would happen from their union. The whole theory seems to be childish in the extreme, but it is nevertheless firmly held by learned and unlearned, and is a potent one with fortune-tellers, when they are diagnosing some family mystery.

Li was so utterly astonished at the wonderful communication made to him by the wizard that for some time he

sat with blanched face and an astounded look in his eyes, gazing at the wizard, unable to utter a single word. He did not at once, however, reject the suggestion as one that was too dangerous for a subject to entertain. The idea began to filter through his mind that, if this statement were true, there was no reason why he should not consider the question of claiming his rights and becoming emperor of the Chinese empire. He was an exceedingly ambitious man and his vanity led him to believe that he was quite capable of administering the affairs of the nation as well as the ruler that now governed the empire.

The wizard, who had been watching him narrowly and could read into his very soul, strongly advised him to take advantage of the present disturbed state of society and assert his rights. "I have a great deal of influence," he said, "with the leaders of the revolutionary movement that is now going on in this region, and if you will consent to be influenced by my advice, I will see them and get them to acknowledge you as the rightful heir to the throne."

After a long discussion as to the feasibility of his succeeding in his treason against the dynasty, he was finally convinced by the eloquence of the fortune-teller that there was no possibility of any failure in the scheme that was laid before him, and so he threw himself heart and soul into the contest that he believed would end in placing him on the Dragon Throne.

The first thing he did was to appoint the wizard, who had impressed upon him the idea that he was a man of extraordinary ability, to be his military adviser, with full powers to negotiate with the rebel lieutenants and to have his name published as the leader in the revolution against the reigning family. These, of course, were delighted with the proposition, for the movement had hitherto been very desultory and very largely disconnected. With the accession of a man of Li's wealth and standing in society a prestige was at once given to the rebellion, and numbers hastened to join the various standards who had hitherto held aloof because they had no confidence in the men that were the leading spirits in the insurrection.

From the moment that Li consented to the advice of the wizard he threw himself heart and soul into the movement, and all his resources were freely expended in buying arms and munitions of war for the great army that he had under his command. So thoroughly equipped were his men that the imperial troops that appeared in the field were on several occasions defeated with great slaughter. This so added to the reputation of Li and the wizard who had been subsequently made commander-in-chief of all the rebel forces, that new recruits were daily coming in and enrolling themselves under the banners.

The Government in the meanwhile had been making prodigious efforts to put such an army into the field that they would be able at one fell blow to crush out the rebellion. In this they had succeeded and the royal forces were advancing by forced marches in the direction of the rebels. On the evening before the great battle was to be fought that was fraught with such mighty issues, the commander-in-chief of the latter sought the tent of Li and begged an interview with him. When he was admitted, the former was struck with consternation when, in the general of his troops, he recognized the old man that had formerly rented his house from him. A sense of coming disaster paralyzed him with terror, for he remembered the threat that had been made that he would revenge himself upon Li for the wanton destruction of his family.

"I see you have recognized me," he said, as he stood within the tent door, and looked with a world of passion in his eyes upon the cowering man before him. "I told you a year ago that I would fearfully revenge the grievous wrong you worked upon me and upon my home. The idea of vengeance has never left my mind, and I have planned it so that I have left no possibility of escape for you. This rebellion has been fostered by me, that I might involve you and every member of your family in ruin. Your fortune has already been spent to the last cash, and to-morrow's battle will see the triumph of the imperial forces, and the scattering of the soldiers upon whom you are relying for victory. You knew that I and the members of my family were fairies, and

yet you dared to measure yourself against us." With these words the old man vanished, and Li was left to the despair that had been gradually creeping over his heart as in fateful language he heard the denunciations of the man he had wronged.

On the morrow confusion and disorder reigned throughout the rebel camp. The commander-in-chief who carried the plan of the battle in his brain was nowhere to be found, and none of the generals and officers knew what disposition of the men should be made to meet the attack of the foe. The imperialists carried everything before them and in the course of a few hours the rebels were flying in disorder over the face of the country. Li was taken prisoner and in accordance with Chinese usage every member of his own and wife's clan, men and women and children, were ruthlessly exterminated, until there was not a single person left to bear the name of the man that had dared to conspire against the Government. The vengeance of the fairy had indeed been complete.

XV.

THE FAIRY SCHOLAR.

ONCE upon a time in the early days of Chinese history a certain fairy, intent upon the purpose of alleviating the pains and sorrows of human life, left his home in the Western Heaven and descended into one of the northern provinces of the empire, where he wandered about in search of those whose state of mind and aspirations after a higher life would induce them to listen to the high and mighty themes about which he had to discourse.

Unlike Li, of the Iron Staff, who thought that a mean and lowly rôle would help him best to discover who were the men that would be willing to relinquish all that this life could give them in their passionate desire to obtain the joys and immortality of the Western Heaven, he decided to appear as a scholar, deeply learned in the lore of China, and whose scholarship should cause him to stand pre-eminent above all the famous literary men whose names were known throughout the empire. He hoped by this method to attract to himself all the thinkers of the region in which he should fix his home, and from some of them he hoped to gain converts who should finally be converted into fairies.

He accordingly took up his abode in a country market town within easy distance of a large and flourishing city that was distinguished not only for the extensive trade that it carried on with the far West, but also for the large number of scholars and thinkers that had their residence in it.

Before long men began to talk in whispers of the strange and mysterious scholar that had appeared amongst them. He was a man of royal bearing and of a dignity that would have suited the great sage Confucius himself, but he

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NOTE.—This story has been dramatized, and is now one of the most popular plays in the country.

was gracious and condescending withal and no touch of the pride that disfigures the character of the learned in China marred the symmetry of his life.

That he was a man of profound learning was a most undoubted fact. There was not a classic that had been written during any period of China's history that he was not perfectly familiar with. He knew not only the text and the commentaries that had been written upon them, but on the obscure passages that had puzzled the greatest scholars who had attempted to elucidate them, he could throw a flood of light that seemed to dissipate at once the mystery in which they had been enshrouded.

It appeared indeed as though he had entered into the mind and purpose of each writer to such an extent that he knew perfectly what they had intended to say, and he so unloosed the tangle in the sentences that were obscuring the meaning, that under his vivid explanations the most profound sentences became as plain as the sun at noon-day.

All the Confucianist guilds for miles around discussed the virtues of this great scholar when they assembled at various times to deal with literary questions. It seemed to them that a new era was going to dawn upon China, and that the sacred books of the nation would be placed upon a higher pinnacle than they had ever been since the days when they left the hands of the great sages and scholars who composed them.

These high expectations were doomed to disappointment through a weakness that is inherent in human nature, but which one never dreamed of as existing in fairyland. This distinguished fairy, who had come down specially to this world from the Western Heaven in order to emancipate men from the trammels of earth, fell in love with a mortal.

It seemed that not very far from where he lived there dwelt a family who had a daughter of surprising loveliness. She possessed the ideal features that seem to the Chinese to combine to make a type of perfect beauty. In all the pictures that had come down from the past of the famous women who had won the hearts of emperors, and whose names are enshrined in the history and the ballads of China,

there was not one that outshone this beautiful village maiden, either in the perfection of her form or in the exquisite charms that gave such a fascination to her countenance.

The fairy scholar, calling at her home one day, happened to catch a glimpse of her as she was disappearing behind the screen that shuts off the women's apartments from the outside world. It was but a fleeting glance he caught of her, but Cupid had taken advantage of that one swift look to send his arrow straight through the heart, and love from that moment took possession of his soul.

He was as passionately and as profoundly moved as any human being had ever been in all the world, and with the same impetuosity that impels mortals, he took steps to secure the lady he had seen as his wife. Calling a middle woman, instructions were given her to see the mother of the lady he had fallen in love with. He intimated at the same time that money was no object and that he would readily give whatever sum they demanded, whilst a present that would make her heart jump for joy would be given to her for her own personal use, if she succeeded in bringing the marriage about.

Having gained the heart of this woman by such unusual and liberal promises, the negotiations, as may be imagined, proceeded rapidly and smoothly. The family of Rosebud, the name of their beautiful daughter, were in very moderate circumstances and the large sum that they were told they might ask for her was the source of extreme satisfaction to them all. But in addition to this there was the exalted position of the suitor to be considered. The honour that would come to them from being allied with such a learned scholar would add greatly to their dignity, and would give them a standing in society that they could never have hoped to attain.

It was true that the proposed son-in-law seemed in some respects to be hardly suited for Rosebud, who was a bright laughing girl and full of fun from morning till night. He, on the other hand, was staid and dignified as became a master of learning such as he was, and he might not be well pleased

when he found that his wife's temperament differed so much from his own.

This was the only thing that gave the parents of Rosebud any anxiety about the future, but as this is a thing that the girls of China are never consulted upon, all the arrangements for the marriage were hurried on, and one day, when the sun was shining with his brightest rays in the heavens, the bridal chair with its gorgeous crimson, and with bands of music filling the air with festal notes, carried the beautiful bride to the home of the bridegroom.

The marriage seemed to be an exceedingly happy one. The scholar was absorbed in his devotion to his wife, and it would seem for the time being he had completely forgotten the high position he occupied as a member of the Western Heaven and that he was willing to forfeit his immortality for the sake of the beautiful mortal that had captured his heart. If Rosebud had only been enamoured with him as much as he was with her, the tragedy that ere long wrecked their home would never have occurred.

After living together very happily for a year or two, the scholar, one beautiful spring morning, went out for a walk among the fields that lay outside the market town. As he was wandering listlessly about listening to the song of the birds and marking how the trees were putting on their summer dress, he was much struck by the conduct of a woman who was standing in front of a newly-made grave, that was a little off the road. He observed that she had a palm leaf fan in her hand with which she was vigorously fanning the undried mortar with which the grave was plastered.

Coming up to her, the scholar said, "I hope you will excuse me, but I really should like to know what you mean by fanning this tomb. I have never seen anyone do anything of the kind before, and I am greatly interested to know why you should be doing it?"

The woman replied, "I will explain to you and then you will see that I have a good reason for doing what must seem to be a very extraordinary act to you. A few days ago my husband died, and his last request of me was that

I should not marry again until at least his grave had had time to dry. I have been anxious to carry out his dying wish, but I am very poor and he left me no means to enable me to support myself, and so I am hastening the drying of the tomb so that I may the sooner arrange for getting another husband who will care for me and my children."

When the scholar reached his home he told the story of the woman to his wife, and he was high in her praise because she had been so faithful to the promise she has made to her dying husband. "If she had not been a woman of a good deal of principle," he said, "she might easily have arranged to get married again without anyone being the wiser."

"To my mind," Rosebud replied, "the woman was perfectly disgusting, and I have no words to express my contempt for her. The idea of her being so anxious to get married before her husband is barely cold in his grave! Why, the thought is most revolting to any right-minded woman. She ought to have struggled on for a longer time, and then, when every plan had been exhausted and when out of sheer necessity she was compelled to think of another husband, one would have felt less contempt for her than one cannot help feeling now for such shameless and heartless conduct.

"If it had been my case," she continued, "I would never have dreamed of ever getting married again, but I should have remained a widow as long as I lived. I cannot understand what you see to admire in such a disgraceful specimen of womanhood, for I think her conduct is most unseemly and unwomanly."

In order to test this last statement of his wife, the scholar determined to put into practice a scheme that had flashed through his mind whilst she was speaking. It was a cruel one and showed that he had no true sense of love, and that in spite of all his professions of devotion he was perfectly heartless and that, in carrying out what might appear to him to be a practical joke, he was going to prove that his wife's honour and reputation were things that were absolutely indifferent to him.

The conception we have of a Chinese fairy is very much lowered by the conduct of this man, for his five hundred years spent in gradually obliterating the meaner passions of the heart, and in filling it with the loftiest virtues, had evidently been in vain, for in his conduct to the woman he married he showed himself to be influenced by motives that would have disgraced any high-minded citizen of the empire.

Two or three days after this conversation, the family was thrown into the wildest confusion by the scholar being attacked very suddenly with a mortal disease, that was so rapid in its action that in the course of a few hours he had ceased to breathe. Rosebud was reduced to despair and refused to be comforted. The neighbours gathered round her and endeavoured to soothe her, but her sorrow was too profound and the sense of her loss too overpowering to allow her to be influenced by anything they could say. She could only weep and sob and make loud lamentations such as the Chinese are wont to indulge in when death enters a home.

Still, in spite of pain and sorrow, the serious business of the home had to be attended to. The scholar lay stiff and stark in a room whither the body had been conveyed, and arrangements must be made for his burial. An old servant who had been employed as a kind of major-domo in the family called in the coffin-maker who, from his stock, returned in an hour or two with a coffin into which the departed scholar was put by his men.

Chinese coffins are all of one general plan and are made to meet every contingency that may possibly occur. Some are larger and some are smaller, but one look of the experienced eye of the coffin-maker enables him to select the one he has in stock that will be suitable on any given occasion. They are all made roomy and ample in their proportions, for the Chinese who can afford it dearly like to clothe the dead in a large number of clothes, which they believe they carry with them into the Land of Shadows and wear there. In consequence of this belief, the coffins that are generally used are so large and heavy that when they are

being conveyed to the grave as many as a dozen sturdy coolies are required to carry them to their last resting-place.

And now the home was in gloom and sadness. The master of the house was dead and lying in his coffin. Rosebud was in despair, and her maidservants, moved with pity for her in her distress, wandered about the house like ghosts, speaking in whispers to each other, and not daring even to smile lest they should intensify the sorrow of their mistress, who had gained their hearts by her gentleness and by the loving way in which she had been accustomed to treat them.

Things were now in this sad condition when the major-domo came to announce to his mistress that a visitor had arrived from a long distance, who, having heard of the great fame of her husband, had travelled many hundreds of miles in order to see so famous a scholar, and to be instructed by him in some of the more profound subjects that modern thinkers were anxious to have explained. He said he had told him that her husband had mysteriously passed away within the last few days and therefore it would be impossible for him to see him.

The visitor expressed his great grief at the news that had been given him, but begged for an interview with his widow, that he might explain to her his own disappointment and the loss that the nation had sustained in the death of such an illustrious savant.

At first Rosebud absolutely refused to see the stranger. She was a young woman, she said, and had only recently been made a widow, and it was entirely contrary to the rules of etiquette that she should be seen by any man, excepting he was a member of her own family.

The servant suggested that this was an exceptional case, that ought not to be ruled by the ordinary precedents that regulated persons in their intercourse with each other. This gentleman had travelled hundreds of miles in order to visit her celebrated husband, and it would be cruel, he thought, to send him back without giving him an opportunity of expressing his disappointment at not being able to see the widow of the illustrious scholar, whose fame had travelled throughout the length and breadth of China.

After considerable discussion and arguments on the part of the major-domo, Rosebud at last very reluctantly gave her consent to have an interview with the stranger, and escorted by two of her handmaidens she entered the room where the visitor was awaiting her.

She was rather startled to find herself confronted by a young man not quite thirty years of ago, whose face was most prepossessing, for it united in it all the elements that the Chinese demand to make up the beau-ideal countenance that painters and poets have liked to depict. It was such a one as would make an impression upon a woman, for whilst it was a strong one, it had an element of comeliness and gentleness that gave it a peculiar fascination of its own.

In the address that he made to Rosebud he was the perfect gentleman, and he told his story in such a modest, sympathetic way that she found her heart moved with a strange flutter that her dead husband had never caused her to feel.

After he had explained how disappointed he had felt when he reached her home and found that the man he had long expected to meet had passed into the Land of Shadows, he begged leave to express his profound sympathy with her and his hopes that she would not sorrow too much for the one that was gone. With a graceful bow, and with a smile that made her heart beat quickly, he withdrew from the apartment, and she could not help but feel that with his departure something had vanished out of her life and left her poorer than she was before.

Hardly had he gone than her Chinese manager appeared and suggested that her visitor having nowhere to stay and being an absolute stranger in the place should be invited to occupy one of the many rooms in the house for the few days he was resting before he returned to his distant home.

Rosebud at first demurred to this on the ground that it would cause a scandal, but her objections were all the more easily overruled since her heart, almost unconsciously to herself, was in favour of the suggestion. He was accordingly installed in one of the best rooms of the house, and from that moment it may be said that the famous beauty was doomed

to lose her heart to this strange visitor, who had in such a brief space of time exercised such a powerful fascination over her.

Love grew fast and furious in the hearts both of Rosebud and the unknown visitor that she had admitted to her home so easily, simply because his personality had exercised such a powerful influence over her. In a day or two neither of them made any pretence of concealing their sentiments for each other. They were in fact madly in love with each other and as there was no reason now why they should not get married, a near day was settled when they should become husband and wife.

On the day appointed a number of guests were invited and a marriage feast was prepared and all was festivity and rejoicing. The house was filled with laughter and sounds of music filled the air, when all in a moment and without an instant's warning the bridegroom fell to the ground in a dead faint. Every effort was made to restore him but without any result. He lay as though life was extinct, for there was no evidence of breath or pulsation and not the least sign of vitality could be discovered in him.

Rosebud was in the greatest distress and appealed to her major-domo to know what ought to be done. The doctor had been called in, but he seemed helpless and could do nothing except shake his head and put on a serious look. He said this was a most dangerous case, and he feared very much that it must end fatally. On one occasion, indeed, he declared, he had seen a case very similar to this, which finally recovered, but the remedy employed was a very heroic one, though it was perfectly successful and in the end the man was brought to life again.

"What was the plan you saw adopted," asked the bride in an agonized tone of voice, "and why should we not resort to it now so that my husband should be saved from dying before my very eyes?"

"Well it seems a very horrible thing to tell you," he said, "but the doctor who was attending the case, and who was a very distinguished man in his profession, declared that the only thing that could save the man was that a dead body

should be opened and the heart taken out and the juices from it put within the lips of the man who lay insensible. There happened at the time to be a son lying dead in his coffin in the house, and it was decided that if his body could be utilized to save his father's life it would be a most meritorious and filial act that would redound to his credit in the other world, and would doubtless influence the Prince of the Land of Shadows to treat him with special kindness and consideration. The body was accordingly opened and, the treatment recommended by the doctor having been carried out, the father was in a very short time completely restored to health.

"Now, it seems to me," he continued, "though it is terrible even to suggest such a thing, that we have the possibility of a cure for this young man in this very house. Your former husband's body lies still unburied in the next room. His life is extinct, of that we are most sure, then why not try a remedy that I am assured was used with perfect success and thus save the man you love from certain death?"

The poor bride of only a few hours' duration was so overwhelmed with sorrow and her mind so bewildered with the sudden tragedy that had driven the sun out of her life and filled it instead with shadows that she had no idea what was the proper thing for her to do. Her heart was so filled with love, moreover, that in her anxiety to save the man who had captured her very soul, she was ready for the wildest and most daring of actions, not thinking how society might look upon them or how they might misjudge her for what she had done.

Seizing an axe she rushed into the room where the coffin of her dead husband lay, and hacking and hewing at it she soon was able to raise the lid that covered his remains. Tearing this away, what was her horror to see the man who was supposed to be dead slowly rise from his recumbent posture. Rubbing his eyes as though he was just awaking from a profound slumber, he said, "What a long time I have been asleep! why did you not wake me before this?"

Poor Rosebud was so thunderstruck with what seemed to her a resurrection from the dead that she dropped her

hatchet on the floor, and ran with all her might to see what was happening to the man who had fainted in the next room. When she got there, there was not a sign or trace of him to be found anywhere. He had absolutely vanished. It then dawned upon her mind that a practical joke had been played upon her, and that the man that had been acting as her lover and whom she married that day was really her husband who had been testing her statement to him, that she would never dream of marrying another in case she were left a widow.

The feeling of shame that crept over her when she realized this was so overpowering that she felt she could never meet her husband again, and so, rushing out of the house, he threw herself into the well and in its depths hid for ever the intolerable sense of misery that was worse for her to bear than even death itself.

XVI.

PHŒNIX, THE BEAUTIFUL FOX FAIRY.

In one of the northern provinces, there existed at the time this story opens a famous city named Kaifeng. It lay on the great road that joined the eastern and western extremities of the empire, and every day it was thronged with passengers that travelled along from the moment that the dawn threw its pale, dim light on it, until the evening shadows gathered so thickly that it became lost in the night.

And what a diversity of human kind it was that made up the motley groups that from one year's end to the next filled it with their echoes, as with the foot of fate they moved along this weary endless road. There were high mandarins in gorgeous sedan-chairs with retinues in long gowns and tasselled hats that swung by with a mighty domineering air, as though the world were made for them.

Scattered thickly along it as far as the eye could reach were the coolies and porters and carriers, the men that do the rough work of the empire, with burdens on their shoulders that would break the heart of any one but a Chinese. And jostling up alongside of these were farmers carrying their produce to the market, strings of mules and camels laden with merchandise for the West, beggarmen with sores on their legs and bodies, their private stock-in-trade to enable them to draw on the pockets of the benevolent, play-actors and mountebanks, shaven priests, and almost every variety of human life that makes up the four hundred millions of this densely populated country.

The city, through which the restless, moving crowds had to pass in their onward march east and west, was a magnificent specimen of the walled towns that abound in every province of China. It had once been the capital of the empire, and it showed its royal character by its massive walls and lofty

battlements, and for many miles they formed a pleasant and imposing picture as the travellers caught sight of them in their approach to this famous emporium.

The roads, too, were amongst the finest in all the northern provinces, for they bound the east and the west in one long line of communication.

For long distances they wound their way over fertile plains and across the foothills of a range of mountains, and then dipping once more to the lowlands they came close to the edge of a noble river that brought trade and life and excitement to the city of more than a million inhabitants that had built their homes in and around the walls of this bygone metropolis of China.

The spaces occupied by the city were wide and extensive. Outside the crowded streets, where the business of the town was carried on and where shops and warehouses were densely packed side by side in a fashion that could exist only in an Oriental city, there were wide and ample spaces where fields were cultivated and flower gardens supplied the rarest flowers that could be grown for the toilette of rich and poor in the city, and where kitchen gardens produced a great variety of vegetables for the markets that abounded in the busy streets of the great city.

There were also extensive open spaces on which magnificent mansions had been built, and where, surrounded by trees and shady walks and picturesque representations of hill and dale and springing fountains, the wealthy inhabitants, undisturbed by the sounds of the city, could enjoy the quiet and repose of a country life.

No wonder that this ancient city, with the many romances that time had woven around it and the mysteries that gathered about the fallen fortunes of many a noble house that had fallen into decay, should have become the chosen rendezvous of the kindly fairies, who, though long since emancipated from human conditions, still retained a kindly feeling towards the race of man from which they had sprung.

But besides the fairies there were gathered the spirits and elves that delighted in the storm and in darkness, and in playing mad pranks that often times had more of wild and

boisterous fun than ill-will or mischief in them. There also were to be seen by those who had done some signal service to them, the fox fairies, who were keenly alive to any favour that might be rendered them by man, and who always endeavoured to repay in no niggardly way any kindly action that might have been done to them. The story that is now being told will fully bear out this statement.

In one of the aristocratic quarters of the city, where the rich built their mansions and where the sounds of the mart never broke in upon the delicious stillness of the place, there was an old dwelling house that had an air of antiquity and grandeur resting upon it. It was situated within its own grounds, which were very extensive, and winding paths embowered amidst trees and rare shrubs, and summer pavilions peeping out at unexpected points showed the artistic tastes of those who had planned and laid them out.

It may be well to explain here that Chinese houses are all built upon one model throughout the whole of the empire. Such a thing as an architect is unknown, for the simple reason that it has never occurred to the minds of the builders in China to deviate from the design that some genius planned in the dawn of the nation's history.

There may be slight modifications here and there, a room added in this direction and another in that, but no one would ever dream of being so reckless as to invent an entirely new design from that which the Chinese hold to be sacred, simply because no one would ever dream of fancying that he could ever elaborate a more perfect plan than the one that had first been modelled in the brain of the early architects of the empire.

The very simplicity of the ideal Chinese house has a charm that thrills the people, both rich and poor, for it has the mysterious power of meeting the needs not only of the very poorest but also of the very wealthiest in the land. It begins with an initial three-roomed building, with the living room in the centre and a bedroom on each side opening out from it. In front of this is the indispensable courtyard, paved with slabs of granite, in which is a well and at one end a diminutive cook-house.

This courtyard is quite equal to another room, for here the winter's firing is stored, and odds and ends, with the thriftless ways in which the Chinese are brought up, are flung and tossed about. Here, too, on hot and sultry days the housewife sits and spins her yarn, or mends the clothes, or gossips with her neighbours. We have here the general idea of every house in the country. If a Chinese wishes to enlarge, he simply adds on another three-roomed house with a courtyard, and another and another until sometimes as many as half-a-dozen or more, each one with its curiously made roof slightly higher than the one in front of it, are added to the original one, and a look of spaciousness and grandeur is secured.

The privacy that is such an essential in China is secured by a high wall, that may enclose not only the buildings, but also, if the family be wealthy, large gardens that are laid out in the old and quaint designs that seem dear to the Chinese heart.

The Chinese mind has a quaint and antique cast about it, that delights in grotesque and old-fashioned designs, in trying to limit the freedom and freshness of nature, and in getting her to submit to ideas that seem to them to be full of æsthetic beauties, but which she persistently shrinks from with the utmost abhorrence.

Unfortunately, the glories of the place had considerably waned, for evil times had fallen upon the family that owned it, and poverty had laid its cold and chilly hand upon them. In order to cut down expenses, fully half the building had been closed, and the rooms that had once resounded with sounds of human life were now desolate and forsaken.

In course of time the family that occupied the other half began to be unpleasantly conscious of strange and weird sounds that proceeded from the part of the building that had been closed up. Banging of doors that were known to be barred and bolted, and long-drawn mournful sighs that seemed to proceed from persons in the bitterest agony filled them with creepy sensations that made life a burden to them.

Occasionally too, about midnight, the sound of voices could be heard above the howling of the storm that were

so wild and unearthly that everyone's heart stood still with terror, and sleep was banished from their eyes. The tension at last became so severe that it was determined to abandon the house. This was accordingly done and only an old caretaker was left in it, who was so poor that he dared to risk the unseen dangers that the spirits might bring upon him rather than endure the evils that poverty was certain to visit him with.

In the same city there lived the nephew of the owner of the haunted dwelling. He was a young fellow, a little over twenty, and was noted for his tenderness of heart towards dumb animals. He could not endure to see any of them hurt, much less killed, and many a fox had he saved when in the hunting expeditions the hounds had been on the point of tearing it to pieces, and had set it free again.

Unconsciously to himself he had on several occasions rescued not simply a poor terrified fox but a fairy in disguise. That he did not dream of this at the time was not because he did not believe in the popular superstition that the fox could at pleasure transform itself into a human being and then again return to the old shape and habits of its race whenever it pleased. He was as deeply imbued with it and had as great faith in it as the most unlearned in the country round had.

There is no doubt but that the well-known cunning of the fox and its fertility in inventing disguises by which it escapes the hands of its pursuers have seemed to the superstitious and rustic minds of the country people of this land, who on the whole are densely ignorant and uneducated, to prove that it has supernatural powers. The many instances, too, to which the credulous can point where foxes have been known to personate human beings has helped to perpetuate the belief which, like the legends and solar myths of ancient times, took such a vivid hold upon the imagination of peoples of various countries for many centuries.

His reputation for tender-heartedness had spread amongst the fairies, and the story of his goodness in delivering so many of their race had been repeated from one to another until his name became a familiar one amongst them, and

many a vow was made that one day they would repay him a thousand-fold for his deeds of kindness to them.

In addition to this loving quality of mercy for the hunted fox, Ping was a man of high courage, to whom fear was entirely unknown. The ordinary dread of ghosts and fairies that was so prevalent, never influenced him in the slightest degree, and his great desire had been to investigate the mystery of the strange beings that haunted his uncle's house and that had driven him and his family in mortal terror from it.

He accordingly arranged with the old man that had been left in charge of the building to come and call him whenever there were any signs that fairies were having any of their nocturnal goings-on, as he would like to visit them and make their acquaintance.

On the very next night, just about midnight, the old man hurried into Ping's home, and with eyes full of wonder and a voice trembling with excitement informed him that the unused rooms were brilliantly lighted up, and voices, gentle and subdued, could be heard as though a family had met for an evening entertainment.

Ping, without a moment's hesitation, hurried out of the house and with hasty footsteps made his way along the narrow, ill-paved streets, only fearful lest the fairies should have vanished before he could get to them. The night was an ideal one for an adventure. It was intensely dark, for there was no moon and the flying clouds had blotted out the stars. Everything had a weird and uncanny look about it. The houses could be just dimly seen through the gloom like giant spectres crouching by the wayside, whilst the trees, enlarged and distorted by the intense gloom in which they were shrouded, seemed like ghostly, shadowy figures that had wandered from the other world to terrify the mortals in this.

When they reached the house Ping noticed that the rooms that had long been closed up were ablaze with a most brilliant light, that from their midnight setting of darkness seemed to shine and sparkle with a radiance such as no human being had ever seen before. A gentle hum of voices

travelled across the courtyard and broke in upon the stillness of the night.

Ping, without any hesitation, advanced up to the room from whence the sounds came and, looking through a crack in the door, he saw a party of four sitting round a table where they seemed to be enjoying themselves in a quiet and luxurious manner.

Two of the people that he saw were middle-aged, evidently husband and wife, who had a refined and elegant look about their faces that showed them to be no common people. There was also a young man about the same age as Ping, scholarly in his manner, and with an air of high breeding that plainly indicated that he came from a high family. The fourth was a young girl of about nineteen, who seemed from the instant he saw her to exercise a wonderful fascination over Ping. She was not only exceedingly beautiful, but there was a sprightliness and a charm about her countenance that added to the grace that nature had bestowed upon her.

Without any ceremony Ping flung wide open the door and entered upon the astonished company. The elderly gentleman rose from his seat and indignantly asked him how he had ventured to intrude himself upon them.

"I am not the intruder," replied Ping, "this house belongs to my uncle and if anyone is an intruder it is you."

The gentleman gave him a long, keen glance and then a pleasant smile softened down the angry lines upon his face, and in a most courteous manner he asked him to be seated and to join in their evening meal. Nothing loth, Ping sat down and soon found himself at home with this mysterious family.

The one attraction for him, however, in this pleasant and refined company was the beautiful daughter, Phœnix, who with the very first sight he had caught of her had captured his heart and made him her slave for ever. The charm of the evening and the keen enjoyment that came to him every moment during the hours that he spent in the company of his newly-made friends were entirely due to the attraction that this lovely girl had for him.

Ping before long discovered to his intense satisfaction by certain signs and tokens that nature exhibits, no matter what the race or clime may be, that the beautiful Phœnix was as much attracted by him as he had been to her, and when he left for home, as the dark clouds in the east began to be tinged with the first hues of dawn, the last thing that lingered in his memory was the flash of her beautiful eyes, and the tender look that rested upon her face, as she thus eloquently expressed her love for him.

Next day Ping, in the expectation of once more meeting with Phœnix, came to make a return call upon the family who had entertained him so royally, but every vestige of them had vanished. The exquisite scrolls that had adorned the walls, the ebony table, the gold and silver ornaments, the jade stones, and the blue enamelled ware of priceless value, had all disappeared, and nothing was left but the dingy, musty-looking rooms that had been allowed to go to ruin by their owner.

Ping was in despair, for he was afraid that Phœnix was lost to him for ever. He had no means of tracing her, and as he was now convinced that she was a fairy he was quite hopeless that any quest of his would ever bring him to the land where she lived. So deeply, however, was he in love that he determined to take up his residence in the haunted rooms, in the hope that the fairies might one day return and then he would meet with his beloved.

Weeks and months went by, but no traces of his lost love ever appeared to gladden his heart, and he began to feel that he would never have the happiness of meeting her again.

One day, sitting in the old room where he had first met her, and with his thoughts wandering away in imagination into the unreal world where the fairies are supposed to pass their time, there suddenly lighted upon a branch of a tree that hung down gracefully, close to the open window near which he sat, a bird with most exquisite plumage. Never had he beheld anything so graceful nor colours so charmingly intermixed as those he now beheld.

As he gazed with admiring wonder upon this beautiful bird which seemed to be absolutely without any fear of him,

it began to trill a song with the sweetest music that he had ever heard in his life. As he listened, entranced with the full, rich notes that came from the singer's throat, it suddenly dawned upon him that there was a story in this music that was meant for him.

He caught the name of Phœnix distinctly and he found that embedded in the beautiful notes that the bird trilled out there was a message from her that filled his heart with the most perfect happiness. She had never forgotten him, he was told, but fate had been against their meeting. The time, however, would soon come when they should see each other again, though in the meanwhile she would have to pass through a great peril from which she would be delivered by him.

Some weeks after this Ping was out watching a hunting party. They were in pursuit of a fox that had given them a long run over the hills and through the woods, and it seemed as though it would give them the slip, so fleet of foot had it been and with such cunning had it managed to elude the dogs.

As he stood looking for some sign of the hunters, he suddenly heard the sound of the excited baying of the dogs, and the voices of men urging them on in their pursuit of the fox. All at once there flashed out from some undergrowth near by the very animal they were after. It seemed utterly exhausted and worn out with its long run, and there was no question but that it would soon fall a prey to the dogs, whose short, impatient yelps showed that they were conscious that the fox could only hold out a very little longer.

Ping's heart was moved with pity at the pitiable condition of the animal, when to his utter astonishment instead of avoiding him it rushed up to him and lay breathless and panting at his feet.

With the instinct of compassion that he had always had for animals in distress he picked it up in his arms and hurried home with it as fast as his feet could carry him. Laying it down on a couch in his room, he began to think what he could do to relieve the utter exhaustion of the animal, when

he was startled to see the figure of the fox change into that of his beloved and beautiful Phœnix.

His delight and his happiness knew no bounds when he found that the woman he had loved with such devoted affection, and who had seemed to be utterly lost to him, was actually here with him and that he had been the means of rescuing her from a cruel and miserable death.

As they were deeply in love with each other, and Phœnix declared that she would never more revert to her old fox life, they were speedily married and their union brought great happiness to them both. The whole of the fox fairy tribe joined in showering down prosperity upon the happy couple, riches flowed into the home and the grim shadow of poverty that had long rested upon it was replaced by sunshine and gladness.

The old mansion that had fallen into such decay was restored to its ancient magnificence. The garden, that had been turned into a wilderness through long neglect, became beautiful once more under the skilful touch of men who had learned the secrets of nature, and who knew how to draw forth the beauties that she refuses to disclose except to those who are in sympathy with her. The deserted rooms of the old decayed house now resounded with the pleasant sounds of human life that banished dullness from them. No longer could they be employed by the wandering fairies in which to hold their midnight revels, for they were now tenanted by troops of relatives that gathered round Ping to share in the good fortune that these mysterious beings had sent him. His name and his house become famous, not only in the city of Kaifeng, but also throughout the province, and many looked with envy upon him for the good fortune that had enabled him to enlist the sympathies and the goodwill of such powerful friends as the fairies had proved themselves to be.

XVII.

THE SCHOLAR HAI, AND THE FAIRY SONGSTER, LADY KWEY.

ONCE upon a time, in the famous province of Shansi ("Western Mountains") there lived a graduate of the empire who had greatly distinguished himself in his studies. Although he was only a little over twenty years of age, he had been selected out of the thousands of competitors that had gone up with him for their examinations for the proud title that everyone of them longed to possess, and that was the first degree that is bestowed upon the successful aspirant for literary honours.

Although he had obtained what in some sense might be called an English B.A. his ambition had been by no means satisfied. It had indeed only been whetted for further triumphs in the future, and in imagination at least he saw himself coming successfully out of three examinations that still lay before him, until he had come out first in the final one in Peking, where the emperor himself was the examiner. He would then have the distinction of being the first scholar in the empire for the year and his name would be in every school and college, and in the homes of the scholars throughout the length and breadth of the land, as one of the heroes in literature who was to stand out as an example and model for all the students in the empire.

This ambition had so wrought into the very texture and fibre of his being that he gave himself up entirely to the study of the ancient books of China. A more abstruse or a more unattractive subject it would be impossible, from a Western point of view, to conceive. Anyone who has attempted to get below the surface of those grim and forbidding-looking books finds himself in such uncongenial companionship that he hurries away from them as speedily as he can. It would seem that the men that wrote them

were absolutely wanting in any sense of humour. Real life was something that had never touched their souls. They appear to have held the conception that asceticism was essential to a right discussion of the higher virtues, and that a smiling face or a heart full of sunshine would disqualify anyone from dealing with them in a proper manner.

Of all the books in the world those that are called the Classics of the Chinese are about the most uninteresting to the great mass of the people of this empire, for the ordinary pursuits of life, and many of the great questions that the human heart is for ever putting were utterly ignored by these great thinkers of the past. From this it may be gathered how gigantic has been the toil of the numberless generations of scholars that during the long eras of the past have spent the greater part of their lives in striving to master them, impelled simply by the great desire of winning the fame and the honours that the state has accorded to those who have been successful in the mighty struggle.

In order to carry out his purpose more thoroughly, Hai took a room in a temple among the hills, where, excepting for the occasional chanting of the priests, and the visits of the souls anxious for some revelation from the idols of the destiny that was in store for them, the profoundest stillness reigned. It was not that he hoped for any inspiration from the hills that towered around, or from the running stream that sang its way along the wooded ravines to the plain below. The voice of spring sounded among those silent heights, the trees budded, and the flowers broke into blossom at its echoes, but for Hai there was no music in it that touched a responsive chord in his heart.

It seemed indeed as though nature in her wildest or her gentlest moods had no power to touch his heart, so absorbed was he in the one eternal grind of mastering those weird and old-world hieroglyphs in which the masters of thought had in ancient times enshrined the ideas that they left as a painful legacy to their posterity. His one passion was to get the very language of the ancient writers so inwoven into his brain, that when the Imperial Chancellor came round to examine the students of his district he would be so able to

recall every phrase and every sentence, that his vast learning would gain him the coveted degree that was to bring him fame and honour in the service of his country.

Hai's voice could be heard at all hours of the day and even of the night, as with the scholar's well-known intoning of the pages before him he endeavoured to impress upon his memory not only each grotesque picture that made up a word but also the ideas that each one contained. It was very wonderful that he had the bodily capacity to go on day after day and week after week at a work that made such demands upon his strength. Not only did he study every hour of the day and night that he was not sleeping or eating, but he also refused to stay his unceasing vigilance even during the recognized holidays, when the most strenuous scholars have always felt it incumbent upon them to cease for a time their exhausting studies.

The Chinese have curious ideas as to how the pupils are to learn their lessons. With us the lads read to themselves, or in a low undertone, but in China every lesson is read at the highest pitch of the little fellows' voices. As the boys grow in years and become young men, the same methods of study are continued, so that it becomes impossible for the students to become masters of their subjects in any other way. A village school, during the hours of study, seems to a foreigner to be a perfect pandemonium, because every lad is shouting out his lesson at the very top of his voice, whilst the master sits at his desk with a look of contentment on his face, for he knows that the pupils are not wasting their time. After a spell of this, nature becomes exhausted, and the lads by common consent sit silent at their desks until they somewhat recover themselves. The master's eye, however, is constantly upon them, and under the spell of that some one ere long more vigorous than the rest raises his voice to begin his stormy assault on the page before him. In an instant the whole school takes up the call and once more the building vibrates with the shouts of every young voice in it.

Such intensity of purpose and such a worthy ambition to excel in the world of letters not only excited the admiration of those who knew him, but in some mysterious way the

thing became known in the land of fairies, and its inhabitants, who have an abiding love for mankind, became so interested in him that they determined that they would do something to add to the happiness of this solitary man whose life was so nobly spent in the acquisition of learning. Not only would they help him in the furtherance of the plans he was pursuing with such unremitting labour for a brilliant future, but they would also try and secure for him some of the home comforts without which the lot of man, even with all the honours that the world can thrust upon him, can never be an ideal one.

One of their number was accordingly specially deputed to carry out the intention of the fairies. He without any delay hastened away from the Western Heaven and flying with the swiftness of lightning he reached the solitary temple among the hills after the darkness of night had fallen upon them. Glancing at one of the side rooms he saw the glimmer of a single wick that could be dimly discerned amidst the pall of night, and at the same time he could hear the monotonous and unmusical chanting of the scholar as he ran along the tones that each one of the intricate little figures called characters claims to be recognized by.

The great mass of the Chinese go to bed soon after it is dark and get up with the first streak of dawn. The result of this is that the nation has never developed the geniuses that have turned their inventive faculties to the devising of some method of lighting up their houses, such as men have done in the West.

The popular light that has been used in all the ages and throughout the empire is a diminutive iron saucer, filled with oil in which lies a rush wick lighted at one end. As it burns to a cinder and the light becomes dim it is lifted up a little out of the oil and the snuff being flicked away a temporary brilliance is attained which is cheering for the time being.

The introduction of late of kerosene oil has really instituted a new era for the Chinese. The darkness and the dullness that have rested upon the nation after the sun has set behind the Western hills will in a very large measure

pass away as the brilliant splendour of the kerosene displaces the twilight of the humble rush. Already in many of the cities of the coast one sees shops that would otherwise have been closed when the darkness crept along the streets, now in the full swing of business under the flare of a kerosene torch that lights up everything near them, and at the same time sends its light up and down the street to attract customers to come and purchase.

Walking through the large room in which the idols were enshrined, and guided in the darkness by the clear voice of the chanter, the fairy from the invisible world slowly crept his way to the room from which the sounds proceeded. Tapping gently at the door, the sounds at once ceased and Hai, opening the door, looked with surprise at seeing the rare and unusual sight of a visitor at that hour of the evening. Inviting him to come in and sit down, he was greatly impressed with his appearance and instinctively felt himself attracted to him. There was an air of dignity about him that made Hai feel that he was in the presence of a man of no ordinary character. His face, too, was a strong one, but so marked with tenderness and good nature that it seemed to invite confidence and trust in anyone that looked upon it.

After conversing together for some little time, the visitor suggested that as it was a festal time of the year he should put away his books and that they should have a pleasant evening together. "I can sing a little," he said, "and if you have anything of a voice you could take a part, and we would make this dreary old temple echo with merry sounds such as have never wandered through its desolate halls during the long years of its existence."

Hai, who had a soul that was full of music, felt a thrill of delight flash through his heart as he heard the cheery words of this pleasant stranger. For a moment the incubus of his long weary studies seemed to drop away from him, as he gladly consented to the proposition that chimed in so well with his own inclinations.

"Before we begin our musical evening," the stranger said, "I may tell you of a liberty I have taken and for which I hope you will excuse me. I knew that in this forlorn and

out-of-the-way place it would not be possible to engage a singing girl to accompany us with her musical instrument or to entertain us with her singing, and so I have brought one with me. I left her at the door of the temple and with your leave I will bring her in to help us in our evening entertainment."

As he said this he hastily left the room, but returned in a minute or two leading a young girl of about seventeen or eighteen with him, who was holding a guitar in her hand. Hai was struck with amazement, for he had never in all his life seen such a beautiful woman as this. She was tall and graceful as the bending willow, whilst her face was more lovely than the pictures he had seen of the famous beauties that had been renowned in the history of the empire. As he looked at her, he became convinced that she was a fairy, for no woman that he had ever met had combined in her person such grace and dignity as this girl that stood before them with the air of a princess in her bearing.

The singing girl in China is one who is often met with in jovial parties of young fellows who wish to spend a merry time together. They are not usually of a high character, but, unfortunately, they have no choice in the selection of this doubtful profession, and are certainly much to be pitied for the position in which they find themselves. They are women that have been sold by their parents when they were young girls to persons who make it their business to provide singing girls for private or public entertainments.

They are trained very carefully in the use of certain musical instruments, and they are taught the popular songs both of the past and of the present day, which they sing to the accompaniment of one of the instruments they have learned. They are a source of great profit to their masters. It is hardly needful to say that the girl introduced by the visitor to Hai was a fairy in disguise who, with the intention of adding somewhat to the joys of human life and of helping to disperse some of the shadows that hang so heavily over it, had transformed herself into a singing girl and with her magnificent voice was charming the companies she was called upon to entertain.

"May I ask," Hai said to the visitor, "where you have brought this lady from, for I was not aware that in the whole of this region there existed any singing girls, or any place where one could be engaged."

"Oh!" replied the man with a smile, "I knew, when I was coming to see you this evening, and when I had determined that for a few hours at least your mind should be relieved from the drudgery of your incessant study of these heart-breaking books, that there was no artiste that I could engage to help us to spend the time pleasantly. And so, as I was passing over 'The Western Lake,' I bethought me of a famous singer who lived on its shore, and I induced her to come along with me."

"The Western Lake!" cried Hai in amazement, "but that is a thousand miles from here. However can you say that you and this fairy lady have travelled so far in the course of an afternoon and that you made such a journey just to give me some extra pleasure?"

After the interchange of a few pleasant words, and the expression of deep gratitude on the part of Hai, the courteous visitor proposed that they should now proceed with their singing. Out of an inner garment he drew a beautifully shaped flute upon which he blew a few notes to test it, whilst the fair musician whose name was Lady Kwey, and who had remained silent whilst the conversation was going on, tuned her guitar with her long graceful fingers and waited for the moment to begin the concert.

Hai, who was well trained in the music of the Chinese, was simply entranced with the beautiful voice of the Lady Kwey. Never before had he heard such sweet notes coming from any human throat as those that echoed round his room, that had hitherto resounded only with the echoes of the mechanical tones of the characters that he had been intoning for so many dreary months during the past year.

It seemed as though a new spirit was born within him, as he listened to the strains she sang and the tender sentiments of the ancient songs and ballads that she rendered with such exquisite feeling. He soon began to feel that there was something more in his heart than mere admiration

for a well-trained artiste, and that love that he had never felt for any woman before had burst upon his soul with a new revelation of sweetness and power.

Whilst these pleasant thoughts were beginning to burn within his heart, he still could not get over the thought that these delightful visitors who had turned the dreariness of his room into an earthly paradise were not human, but had come from a far-off land where the footsteps of mankind had never trodden. The fact that they had come that afternoon from the Western Lake that was situated far away in the western portion of the empire was proof positive of this. The beauty of the Lady Kwey and the exquisite charm with which she rendered the pieces she had sung made such an impression upon his heart that, whether human or not, or whether they were fairies from the Western Heaven, it mattered not, he had fallen deeply and madly in love with her, and it seemed as though the world would for ever be a dull and dreary place without her.

Whilst these thoughts were passing rapidly through his mind his visitor said to him, "How exquisitely the moon is shining to-night. See how the hills around are bathed in its silver light. It would seem as though all nature were gazing with upturned face at her, as she rides through the sky, and the spell of her beauty is so strong upon the world that it lies in solemn stillness drinking in the inspiration and the poetry that are poured upon it from an unclouded sky. But if you want to see the full magnificence," he continued, "of the full moon shining in her unclouded glory, you must go to the Western Lake, and on such a night as this watch the moonbeams as they play upon its surface, and see how the moon makes for herself a silver path right across its waters along which the fairies may pass to and fro. Will you not come with us and look at this wonderful sight and see the glory of the moon on that romantic lake?"

Hai, who by this time was deeply in love with the fair singer, and who would have been willing to travel the wide world over in her company, signified his delight at the proposal, but expressed his wonder as to how they could travel a thousand miles during the short hours of a winter's night.

"Oh! as far as that is concerned," the stranger smilingly replied, "you need have no concern whatever. A thousand miles is no more to me than it would be for you to go to your next door neighbour. The question now to be thought of is how would you like to travel. Would you like to make the journey by horse or by boat, for you can have your choice of either mode of locomotion? For myself I advise the boat and, if you agree, I shall at once summon one from the Milky Way that shall carry us with the speed of lightning to the distant lake."

Hai, by this time, was so overcome with amazement that he could do nothing but simply acquiesce in whatever the stranger proposed. The latter then, with a wave of his hand, pointed towards the sky in which the full-orbed moon was riding with great brilliance and majesty, when a fleecy cloud was seen suddenly to appear and, quick as thought, it came travelling through the air to where Hai and the two visitors were standing, and in a moment was floating at their side.

The shape of this boat from the Milky Way was of the most exquisite design and workmanship, and Hai looked upon it with the utmost wonder and astonishment. Its shape was that of an open fan, whilst the rowers, who sat in silence waiting the orders of the mysterious visitor, seemed to be a collection of the most graceful and beautiful wings such as were far beyond the conception of any human mind to devise.

Taking their seats, at a motion of the visitor's hand, the boat shot up with inconceivable rapidity into the sky. So high, indeed, did they go that all sight of the earth was lost, and the stars gleamed in the firmament whilst the figure of the "Woman in the Moon" came out so brilliantly distinct that the outlines that are so dim and hazy from the earth became clear and well defined as they soared up into infinite space.

The travellers seemed scarcely to have started on their journey when the boat began to descend, the mountains came into view, and the lights of earth flashed like far-off stars. In a moment they found themselves resting on the surface of the famed Western Lake. The scene was indeed

a most beautiful one. Hundreds of boats were moving about on the moonlit waters, whilst the sound of music came travelling over the silver flood with a beauty and a harmony that filled the heart with the most exquisite pleasure.

For hours the mysterious rowers with the gentlest motion of their wings propelled the boat in and out amongst the merry craft that lingered on the lake, enjoying the sights and sounds that seemed more beautiful than they would have done had the sun been shining in his strength. After a time, another boat drew up alongside of them, and the occupants said they had come to carry the Lady Kwey to the shore. Hai, who had become more and more enamoured of the beautiful singer, used every persuasion that he was capable of to prevent her departure. He was a fine handsome-looking young fellow, and he had such a look of culture and of high breeding that he had evidently made a deep impression upon the heart of Lady Kwey.

When he found it impossible to detain her from the friends who had come for her his heart seemed to be filled with despair, and with eyes filled with love and looking upon her with the tenderest affection, he asked her when it would be possible for him to see her again.

"If you really love me," she replied, "you will easily find me out, if you inquire for Lady Kwey, for I am known everywhere, and anyone will direct you to where I live."

Just at this point the mysterious visitor intervened, and asking Hai for his pocket handkerchief he handed it to the Lady Kwey, and said, "This will be received by her as an evidence that she is pledged to you, and any time within the next three years that you come to claim her as your wife, she will be ready to give herself to you." The young girl signified her consent to this. She then passed into the boat that had come to carry her off and in a short time it was lost in the shadows that lined the shore.

As the night wore on and the moon sank lower and lower in the western sky, the visitor suggested that they should now go ashore, as the special beauty of the moonlit lake would disappear before the coming of the sun. No sooner had they reached the bank of the lake than the boat

shot up with incredible swiftness into the air and in an instant was out of sight, leaving them gazing at its flight.

As they were sauntering along the shore, and the early dawn was revealing the mountains that lay like sleeping giants in the near distance, all at once a most beautiful horse, fully caparisoned, came out of the shadows that lay in the distance, and approaching Hai stood in front of him as though it wished him to mount. No sooner had he got upon its back, than his companion vanished out of his sight, and no trace could be found of him, though Hai made the most anxious search for him.

Hai was now in great anxiety as to what course he should take. He was an immense distance from his own home, and there was not a single person with whom he was acquainted in this entire region. He was, moreover, entirely without friends, and how he was to get back to the mountain temple in the distant province without them was a thought that filled his heart with dismay. Whilst he was mentally discussing this very important question, he suddenly noticed a small bundle that was tied securely to the front of his saddle. Wondering what it could be, he opened it, when to his extreme joy, he found it contained silver ingots to the value of several hundreds of taels, which had been generously provided by the mysterious visitor who had shown such marvellous powers during the past night.

Relieved of all anxiety by this pleasant discovery that he had made, Hai turned his horse's head in the direction of his home. This animal he found to be a perfect treasure that never failed him once during the long journey of several weeks that had to be travelled before he reached the temple where he had been living. It never tired and it never attempted to escape from him. It travelled up the sides of great mountain paths that led to the plains on the other side. The great rivers that lay in the way it crossed at a single bound, no matter how wide they might be. The journey with such an animal was an exquisite pleasure trip, and when they reached the well-known gates, a feeling came over Hai that he wished it could have been extended for some weeks more.

Ever since the eventful night in which he had parted with the Lady Kwey, Hai had never once forgotten her. His love indeed seemed to have become intensified, and the thought that he had probably lost her for ever added but to the sorrow that filled his heart, and his longing to see her once more. It was useless to endeavour to search for her, for she had vanished so completely that she had left absolutely no trace of her existence. He would have gone to the world's end to find her if only the slightest clue could have been given him as to where she was to be found.

His only solace now were his studies, which he pursued with even more intensity and devotion than he had ever done, but life was never the same to him since the beautiful singer had touched his heart with a new sensation of love. After two years of most strenuous labour at his books, during which he had gained fresh literary honours, Hai's longing to behold the Lady Kwey was at length gratified. Having been invited to a great feast in the house of a relative, he was informed that one of the attractions in connection with it would be the presence of a famous singing girl whose voice was such a magnificent one that her praises were sung by all those who had had the privilege of hearing her sing.

Hai was greatly interested in this, though it did not occur to him to connect her with the one who had been in his thoughts ever since he had parted from her. As soon, however, as she entered the room his heart gave a great bound of delight when he recognized her as the woman to whom he had lost his heart, and whom he had given up all hope of ever seeing again. His joy was enhanced by the fact that he saw that she had not forgotten him, but that a wave of colour flashed across her face when she caught sight of him.

Addressing her at the close of the entertainment he discovered that her love for him was just as strong as was his for her. This simplified matters considerably, and arrangements were made for their speedy marriage. It was a profoundly happy one and Hai and his fairy bride became famous for the devotion they showed to each other, and for the distinguished honours that were showered upon their home during the passing years.

XVIII.

MR. WANG AND THE TAOIST ABBOT.

THE Chinese, to the mere casual observer, or to one who has not studied his character, has all the appearance of a man that is utterly devoid of poetry or romance. His very person gives one this impression. His features are wanting in those finer lines of beauty and of thought that one always associates with one whose vision reaches into the unseen, and who brings back with him pictures and images from the unknown land in which in thought he has been travelling.

His face as a rule is exceedingly plain and unæsthetic and the only striking thing about it is its unattractiveness. For this reason men are apt to jump to the conclusion that the Chinese mind may be a very practical one, but it is utterly deficient in imagination. This is an entire mistake. The literature of China abounds in novels and romances and poetry that prove that men of the "Black-haired Race" are just as adventurous as those of the West in the daring flights that they make into the untravelled regions where spirits and fairies and invisible beings are alone supposed to dwell.

The story of Mr. Wang will show that the youth of China often have their minds filled with romance, and that they believe there is a world that lies beside the one in which their daily life is passed, into which they long to enter to grasp the secrets that would give them power to control the fate that oftentimes brings pain and sorrow upon them here.

The young fellow was the son of a man who was noted for his wealth and also because of the fact that he was the fortunate father of twelve sons. This latter fact had given him a reputation that made him the envy of many a home in the region in which he lived.

The reason for this will be understood by those who know that there is a passionate desire in the hearts of all Chinese parents for sons, whilst the utmost apathy, if not indeed aversion, is shown to the appearance of daughters. Fathers and even mothers when reckoning up the number of children in their family do not usually count girls at all. You ask a Chinese how many children he has got, and with a look of pride that flashes across his yellow countenance, he will perhaps say that he has four. You ask him how many are boys and how many are girls. He looks at you with a perplexed air, and he says, "I told you I had four sons." "Yes, but have you no daughters?" "Oh! yes," he replies, "I am very ashamed to say I have three." This information is dragged out of a man, and is rarely given spontaneously, simply because the glory of a family consists in the number of its sons and in the fewness of its daughters.

There is no doubt but that this love for sons arises from the sense of protection that they give to the family as well as to the clan. China is a land where justice is but slowly and indifferently administered, and where great wrongs are committed without any power of having them redressed. The executive is very often weak, and nearly always corrupt. The consequence is that men have to depend upon themselves for protection from oppression, and if the male members of a clan are numerous they can not only defy those that would endeavour to tyrannize over them, but they can even become the aggressors, and carry things with a high hand over those who have not a following large enough to be able to resist them.

Another very powerful reason why the Chinese desire sons is because of the cult of ancestor-worship that is believed in by them. When a Chinese dies he becomes a greater force, it is believed, in the land of the spirits than ever he was whilst he was alive. In some mysterious way that no one ever attempts to explain he is credited with the power of sending prosperity or adversity to his people that he has left behind him. Ancestor-worship is not founded nowadays on affection, but on the desire to propitiate the dead relatives in the Land of Shadows. For this purpose offerings of food

and paper money are made to them twice a year, which, by a system of hocus-pocus, reach them in the dreary abodes they inhabit there.

The only people that can make these offerings are the sons, or the male members of the clan. No women may do so, and therefore, for the happiness and prosperity of the home, it is essential that there should be sons in it. If there are none, lads from poorer homes are bought, who take the family name, and are thus empowered to offer sacrifices to the dead in the ancestral temples and at the graves in the third moon at the Feast of Tombs.

The seventh boy in Mr. Wang's family was possessed of a fine imagination, and fairy stories had for him a fascination and an attraction that never failed to fill his mind with the utmost delight. As he grew up he devoured all the books he could buy or lay his hands upon that described the life and doings of that mysterious class of beings that to childhood of whatever nationality has always possessed an unfailing interest. As he advanced in years his passion for the marvellous only seemed to intensify, and his desire to be possessed with the power that would enable him to execute the wonderful feats that the fairies could perform grew stronger and stronger within him.

Not far from where he lived, there was a famous Taoist monastery in which dwelt a number of priests, the heads of which though they had the appearance of ordinary mortals, were yet in reality fairies who, for the sake of working out certain benevolent purposes for the benefit of mankind, had assumed the appearance of Taoist priests in order the better to carry out their beneficent designs.

The guise that these kindly beings had taken upon themselves in order to hide their secret from men was the very best that could have been adopted by them. The priests of the Taoist church have always been credited with having extraordinary powers over all kinds of spiritual forces. They are supposed to be able to control the countless spirits, both good and bad, that are continually roaming through the illimitable spaces that bound this earth of ours. They possess potent spells, and mysterious charms and high-sounding

incantations with which they can terrify the invisible foes that would bring ruin on human life, and thus cause them to fly in terror to some far-off scene, where their intended victims need never fear them again.

For example, a certain district is troubled with an outbreak of cholera. This is not put down to bad drains and shocking insanitary conditions as it ought to be, but to the workings of malign spirits who have a deadly hatred against the people residing in it. Money is collected and a certain number of Taoist priests are engaged to drive away the evil forces and bring back health and happiness to the terror-stricken inhabitants.

Besides incantations, actual force is employed to terrify the spirits, and men with rusty swords are seen flying about, slashing at the air and cutting at the invisible foes. These, it is believed, are so frightened that they fly in the utmost alarm and seek refuge in other parts where the priests have no power to pursue them.

Anxious to be initiated into the mysteries of the unseen, by which he would gain powers that would make him supreme against all the chances and changes of this mortal life, Wang one day started for a visit to the mountain monastery.

He was a young man of large ambitions and a vivid imagination, but without that earnestness or stability of character that might have led to a realization of some of the visions that flashed through his brain. As he ascended the hill, he saw the plain lying like a great garden stretching away from the foot of the mountain, and his thoughts seemed to catch the inspiration that the pure air of those lofty heights imparted to them. He was now going to enter upon a career, he believed, that would satisfy the longings that he had felt for many a year, and his mind was full of contentment.

After winding his way up the lofty sides of the mountain and through miniature ravines that were hidden away amidst giant boulders that far-off centuries had thrown with careless and yet artistic hands into poses of solemn grandeur, he finally landed on a terrace embowered amidst great pine

trees and lofty cedars, whose birthdays had long been lost in the mists of the past. Nestling beneath the shadow of these rose the walls of the famous monastery whose name was known far beyond the province in which it was situated.

As Wang entered the great doors that ever stood open, he saw a venerable looking priest sitting cross-legged on a cushion. He was the abbot of the monastery, and though to all appearance he was simply a man of exalted position in the taoist church, he was in reality a fairy from the Western Heaven, who had consented to become man in order that he might be able to use his influence in uplifting and blessing any of the human race with whom he might come into contact. He at once recognized Wang as a man full of visionary and impractical ideas about fairies, and he determined that he would, if possible, teach him a few lessons that would dissipate the nonsense that was filling his brain and would make him more qualified to fulfil the common duties of every-day life.

No sooner did Wang catch sight of the priest than he approached him with a profound obeisance and told him that he had travelled up the mountain side in order that he might solicit the privilege of becoming his disciple and of learning from him the mysteries of the Taoist religion. The abbot received him in a most gracious manner, but expressed a doubt whether he would be able to stand the hard discipline through which he would have to pass before he could hope to grasp the mysterious power that would give him control over forces more subtle and potent than any that exist among men.

"You must remember," he said, "that you have been brought up in a home where almost every wish and desire of your heart has been granted you. You have never known the grip of poverty, for your father is a rich man, and the pain and sorrow through which men become refined have never darkened your life or strengthened your moral fibres. If you will take my advice," he continued, "you will return to your home after you have rested with us awhile, and you will find, if you are willing to go through as many hardships as those that await you here, that a new power will be given

you that will prove more serviceable to you than any supernatural or magical influence that you may fancy you will acquire by your residence amongst us."

The young man was enthusiastic and his mind was too dazzled with the brilliant prospect which his imagination painted in such bright colours to accept this homely and common-sense advice. He protested, on the other hand, that he was prepared for any test that they might decide to put him to, and that, however hard it might be, he would willingly submit to it.

In the dim twilight early next morning, the abbot presented him with an axe and told him off with a number of others to go on to the hill side and cut firewood for the use of the dwellers in the monastery. It was with a joyous and gladsome heart and with jokes and laughter that sent their echoes along the ravines and steep mountain cliffs, he accompanied the merry band that sought out the sprouting pine trees, or cut off the branches of the older ones, whilst the sunbeams began to slide down the western side of the great range, and to cast his long streams of light across the landscape that stretched far away into the distance.

Wang now felt even in this humble occupation that he was taking his first step that would ultimately lead him into the fairy-land where he would be initiated into the mysteries that would give him mastery over the spirits, and enable him to acquire powers that would elevate him above the pains and sorrows of life.

Day after day went on, but there was no change in the monotonous labour that had been assigned to him on the morning when he was supposed to commence his novitiate. Every day at dawn he had to start out with his companions and begin the weary march among the boulders and sheltered spots where the storms that swept these great towering heights could not touch the tender pines that hid themselves within them. For the first few days the novelty and the romance enabled him to look upon this work as a most delightful one. The bracing air, the healthy exercise, and the sense of exhilaration that filled his whole frame as he looked over the wide expanse of hills and plains that met his vision

gave him an exquisite feeling of happiness. But as the time went on, he began to tire of what he felt was a drudgery that had always been left in his home to the labourers that his father had employed to do such rough work.

His hands, moreover, that had never been accustomed to such toil, began to be blistered, so that it was a positive pain for him to grasp the axe or attempt to cut the firewood that was needed for the cooking of the food of the large numbers that resided in the monastery. He became so discontented with his lot that he began to have serious thoughts of returning home and abandoning all attempts to get initiated into the secrets of the fairy world.

The abbot, who had been watching him with a kindly interest, and who saw how his plans for awakening him to a common-sense view of life were beginning to succeed, determined now to complete the cure and to send him home with all his fantastic views completely knocked out of his brain.

Returning from the mountain side with his burden of firewood that he had gathered with such labour, the fairy abbot invited him to come and spend an hour or two with him in the company of some friends, who had come from a distance specially to visit him. After changing his dress, Wang found, when he came at the appointed time into the large reception hall, that a considerable number of the novitiates had also been invited, and that two distinguished-looking men whom he had never seen before were seated talking to the abbot.

In a very short time the light began to fade, for the sun had set some time before, and Wang was expecting that at any moment the servants would be called to bring in lights. Instead of this, the abbot cut with a pair of scissors a piece of white paper into a round globular shape, and throwing it with a dexterous flick of his fingers on to the wall, in an instant the large room was lighted up with what seemed a full moon, only the light was so brilliant that for the moment it appeared as though the sun had been brought back again from its westward course and was once more illumining the world.

The conversation that was now carried on between the abbot and his two distinguished guests was of such a lofty and exalted character that the young priests sat spell-bound as they listened in amazement to the high and noble themes that were being discussed by them. So entranced were they that they forgot the passage of time and became absorbed in the mysteries that were being talked about as though they were of the commonest and most ordinary character, though they were indeed such as are never heard in the language of mortals.

All at once one of the guests said to the abbot, "You have given us the moon with which the room is so beautifully illumined, could you not by the same power bring to us the woman that lives in it,* so that she might entertain us for a short time?" With a smile upon his face, the abbot seized a chopstick that was lying on the table by which he was sitting and threw it deftly at the moon that was shining on the wall, when instantly a diminutive figure of an exceedingly beautiful woman was seen to appear in the very centre of the shining orb. As every one looked on in wonder and amazement, the exquisite figure grew larger until it assumed the proportions of an ordinary woman, only with so fair a face and such perfect symmetrical outlines as are never seen on earth.

Stepping down out of the moon, she first of all sang some beautiful songs that gave intense pleasure to the hearers, for her voice was like the mellow, sweet notes of a flute that lingered on the air, and filled it with a delightful harmony. She then began to dance, and her motions were so full of grace that every pose she made filled the onlookers with the greatest admiration. Finally she made one surpassing graceful bound into the air, and landing on to the table she was transformed again into the original chopstick, that lay quivering and trembling close to the hand of the fairy abbot.

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* In the West, popular belief makes the inhabitant of the moon to be a man. The Chinese, however, with apparently more reason, declare that it is a woman whose figure can be seen when the moon is shining her brightest in the heavens; indeed as one looks more carefully at the figure that we have been accustomed to consider as a man, we begin to feel that the human face that seems depicted in it has more the character of a woman than that of a man.

Wang, after this wonderful evening in which he had seen the miracles that he had often dreamed about actually performed in his very presence, determined to banish the thought of going home that had filled his heart before, and to remain on, in the hope that before long he would not be required to fulfil the menial duties that he had thus far been given to perform.

The days, however, went on just as they had done when he first entered the monastery. Every morning he was compelled to shoulder his axe, and wander about in search of the stunted pines, that only a diligent scrutiny could now discover in out of the way places and in sheltered spots on the mountain side.

After a month of this, he again sought the abbot and informed him that he had decided to return to his family, for it seemed to him that he was making no progress in the knowledge that he had come so far to learn. He could not see, he said, how the cutting down of firewood on these barren hills was going to help him to gain an insight into the mysteries of the spirits, or to help him to perform the wonders that would make him superior to his fellowmen. "I thought my life in this famous monastery was going to be one of study instead of manual labour. I have never spent such a laborious time in all my life as I have done during these past two months, and I would ask permission from you to let me go back to my home."

The venerable priest replied with a smile that he quite approved of this decision. He had evidently come, he said, to the temple with an entirely wrong conception of how men were to gain an entry amongst the spirits so as to acquire the mysterious powers they possessed. It was only by high virtues, and patient self-denial, and intense love for man that the secrets of the Western Heaven were ever revealed to mortal man. "I have tested you for two months with a very simple form of labour, yet you have broken down, and you have shown that your sole motive for desiring to gain miraculous powers was simply a vain desire to penetrate into mysteries that can never be revealed but to those who have gained such a lofty character by the utter abnegation of self

that it would be safe to entrust to them the powers that come to those who would know how to use them aright. It will be well for you," he continued, "to return to your family and, casting aside your wild and visionary views, try to carry out the duties of life in the best manner you can."

Wang was terribly disappointed at this outspoken and homely advice of the abbot. He was naturally of a vain and frivolous nature, with a vast amount of self-conceit, and he could not comprehend how the possession of control over spirits and the material forces of nature had anything whatever to do with personal character.

"I am sorry to hear you say this," he said, "as I was always under the impression that the whole thing consisted of certain secrets that might be revealed to any one, and that as you possessed them you could easily initiate me into them so that I should have powers that would free me from the limitations of time and sense, and enable me to perform such wonderful things as I saw you accomplish a month ago. As you do not seem willing to do this may I beg of you before I leave that you will give me one little atom of power such as I have seen you exercise occasionally when you have been moving about in the monastery? What I mean is this, I have observed that walls seem to have no influence in impeding you when you are moving about, but that you walk through them as though they did not exist. Give me," he continued, "the ability to do just this one thing, so that when I return home, I may have something to show my friends that will prevent them from laughing at me."

The abbot who seemed highly amused, said smilingly, "Very well, I shall grant your request, though remember that to be able always to accomplish even such a trifling thing as that you will require to live a virtuous life, and to have your mind endowed with noble ideals. You see the wall before you. Go straight on and walk through it, as though there were nothing in your way."

Wang started forth delighted, but his steps began to falter as he drew near to it and saw no sign of its yielding before him. "Go on," said the man, "for not a stone will move till you are close up to it. Push on and only have

faith, for before that everything must give way." Inspired by these words Wang made a sudden movement forward and, dashing full speed at the wall, he found it open up before him, and, turning back to look at it, after he had passed through, he saw that the breach had automatically closed up behind him and that the wall now stood between him and the venerable abbot, who stood smiling on the other side of it.

Next morning at dawn he bade good-by to the monastery and began his descent of the mountain. Hours went by as he painfully picked his way down the stone steps that had been constructed centuries before. They had now become so smooth through the tread of countless feet that had travelled up and down them in the weary pilgrimages of men and women to the monastery, who had hoped to get relief from the burdens of life that oppressed them, that it was no simple matter to keep his footing on them. In some places, too, the slabs that formed the footway had been dislocated by the heavy rains that had sent their streams tearing down in torrents over them, and by the winter storms that had tried to wrench them from their places.

At length, however, the strain upon his muscles in the long descent was over and he finally stood upon the plain, whilst the great mountain, now bathed in the midday sun, stood up in magnificent splendour, with its brow seeming to touch the sky, and with the proud air of a monarch as it cast its glance far over the distant landscapes over which it seemed to rule.

Wang was received back by his family with the greatest delight. They had long been distressed at what they considered his folly in his endeavour to penetrate into the secrets of the spiritual world, and they had hoped that something would happen to him on the mountain that would give him a saner view of life and drive the nonsense out of his head. They little dreamed that it was the wisdom of the wise old abbot, the fairy in disguise from the far-off Western Heaven, that was really going to cure him of the ideas that fancy had wrought into his brain, and which no amount of argument had hitherto been able to expel from his thoughts.

After the congratulations upon his safe return were over, and smiling faces showed how hearty was the delight that filled every heart at seeing him once more in their midst, some one laughingly asked him whether his visit to the famous shrine had been the means of initiating him into the mysteries of the world of spirits. Had he got control over these mysterious beings? Could he turn the roving elves out of the haunted houses, and could he prevent them from wandering about during the midnight hours and prevent them from casting a spell over people's dwellings? They would all be so pleased if he would but give them some display of the magic art that the famous abbot in the mountain monastery was credited with possessing.

Wang replied that his stay had been too short to enable him to acquire all the knowledge he had desired, but still it had not been entirely in vain, and he would now proceed to give them a demonstration of a power that had been bestowed upon him that was denied to ordinary mortals.

Leading the company out from the room in which they had all been sitting into the open courtyard in front, he pointed to the high, enclosing wall and asked them to take particular notice of it. It was high and substantially built of granite blocks, and was well in keeping with the ancestral building which in a certain sense it was supposed to protect. "Be silent now and watch," he said, "and mark the ease with which I shall pass through it, as though it were made of the lightest vapour."

They all laughed at this, and gathering in two groups on each side of him, they looked on with amused faces and with sparkling eyes, eagerly expecting the proof Wang was going to give them of his supernatural power. "Behold now," he called out in a loud voice, and with head lowered he made a sudden bolt and rushed with all his speed at the wall. Instead, however, of passing through it with the ease he had predicted, his head came with a violent shock against the stone work and in an instant he was lying senseless on the ground.

For a long time he lay in danger of his life. Concussion of the brain ensued and it was with difficulty that he finally

emerged from the serious condition into which he had been thrown. When he did, the fantastic notions that he had previously held had all vanished, and never again was he heard to express any desire to make incursions into the land of the spirits.

XIX.

THE KING OF THE SNAKES.

In the land of the snakes, where human beings are never allowed to enter because of their known hostility and their desire to kill every serpent that they come near to, a numerous race of these despised reptiles live a life of their own. They have their own laws by which they regulate their conduct to each other. They have also codes of honour, which exercise an ennobling influence upon serpent society generally, and they have well defined legislation with regard to right and wrong, that tends to encourage what is good and to repress what is evil. The highly intelligent and subtle character of this snake community has tended to produce a more refined and civilized condition of society than what is found in any of the other lower orders of creation.

In consequence of this, it has been found that some of the more advanced amongst the serpents have become dissatisfied with their inferior condition and have had ambitious longings to emerge from their mean and lowly state and to be transformed into men. A notable instance of this was seen in the one who is the hero of our present story.

This serpent, by his superior wisdom as well as his noble birth, had been elected king, and he ruled his subjects with such justice and impartiality that he was exceedingly popular in every class of snake society. He was not content, however, with the power that this gave him, nor did he rest satisfied until he had discovered a method by which he could assume the human shape, whilst he retained all the characteristics of his own original nature. He was able at will to change from one to the other, so that he could govern in his own kingdom just as he had always done, whilst he could enjoy the pleasures of the world of man, whenever he felt inclined to do so.

The rôle that this Prince of the Snakes elected to adopt was that of a country gentleman, and, as he had a large amount of money at his command, he bought a small estate and had it laid out in the most beautiful way that the highest art could suggest. His gardens were especially famous, for not only had large sums been expended upon them, but they also contained the finest flowers that China produced, whilst at the same time there were specimens amongst them that had never before bloomed in the Flowery Kingdom. These had been brought by the ingenuity of the King of the Snakes from his own dominions, and because of their rarity were regarded by visitors with special pleasure and admiration.

One day in strolling round his gardens, he observed an old man busily going from flower bed to flower bed picking the choicest flowers he could find in each. Approaching him, he said, "Old man, how is it that you take the liberty of coming into my garden, and plucking my flowers?"

"I pluck them," he replied, "for my four daughters, who have a passionate fondness for flowers of every description."

"How many daughters have you?" the prince asked, "and will you describe them to me?"

"I have four, and they are all at home with me, for I am so fond of them that I have not found it in my heart to be willing to arrange for their marriage, though I have had many offers from the parents around, who are anxious to have wives for their sons. The eldest is the least well favoured of them all. She is pockmarked, but she is a woman of a great deal of character, and with a strong and active mind; the second is round-faced like a drum; the third has a face shaped like a duck's egg; whilst the fourth, who is the prettiest of the lot, has features that resemble a typical hen's egg."

The Chinese conception of the beautiful in women has been formed from natural objects that seem to them to possess the elements of beauty within themselves. A hen's egg is one of these, and no higher compliment can be paid to a woman than to declare that her face has been fashioned after the pattern of this well-known object.

In the West great consideration is given to the shape of the mouth and the nose, and to the colour of the eyes. In China all eyes have but one colour and that is black. These may be large and luminous, and then they are greatly admired. The noses are mainly of the Mongolian type and are inclined to be flat, whilst the mouths have a tendency to be large. These features, however, whilst they do give a character of their own to any face, are not so much taken into account in declaring whether a woman is pretty or not, as the general contour of the whole countenance, and the woman who has the true hen's egg shape of face, may in spite of nose or mouth be declared to be a handsome one. Of course, should the features be marred by any physical defect, it would detract largely from her beauty, and prevent her from being counted amongst the belles of her district.

The king, with admirable eye for the beautiful, though originally he was nothing but a snake, declared to the astonished old man that he had made up his mind that he would have the fourth daughter for his wife, and that unless she came to his mansion, that was situated some distance away in the country within ten days, he would send vast numbers of serpents, both large and small, that would proceed to devour him and all his family.

Deeply impressed with this threat, for he seems to have been unusually impressed with the personality of this strong man that addressed him, he went home and took to his bed. His eldest daughter by and by came to him and asked him what was the matter. He explained to her that if one of his daughters was not given in marriage to a certain rich man, whose gardens he had visited that day, a plague of snakes would visit him that would devour him. He then asked her if she would not be willing to do something to rescue her father from the impending destruction by consenting to be married to this man.

This young lady had very decided opinions of her own, and had evidently been allowed too much of her own way in the years gone by. This was shown by the fact that the father thought it at all necessary to ask her to consent to the proposed marriage. Young women are never consulted in

China with regard to their future partners in life. The whole thing indeed is settled by the parents, and the girl is not supposed to know that any marriage arrangements have been made until very nearly the time when preparations are being completed to carry her in her bridal chair to her new home. That the father should think it necessary to get her consent showed how lenient he had been in the government of his home.

The young lady promptly replied that she should on no account agree to any such proposal as had just been made to her, and that it was better that her father should be devoured by snakes than that she should be compelled to live with a man that, from his very nature, would most certainly be unkind to her. The old man, greatly distressed at the unfilial conduct of his eldest daughter, and the cruel answer she had given to his appeal, asked the second and third, successively, if they would not come to his assistance, but they both peremptorily refused to do anything for him, and they declared plainly that whether he lived or died was no concern of theirs.

The fourth daughter whose name was "Almond Blossom" was the most beautiful among the four daughters. Her face was not only of the typical contour so admired by the Chinese, but its attraction was also increased by the beauty of her soul that seemed to shine throughout her features and to add a grace and a dignity to them.

She was of a very gentle, loving disposition and her unconscious aim in life had always been to forget herself and to add to the happiness of those around her. Under the imperious rule of the eldest sister she had been very much coerced and kept down in the home, but this had never seemed to quench the loving, tender feeling that beat so warmly within her heart for her and for the other members of the family.

When her father appealed to her to know if she would be willing to sacrifice herself for him, she at once timidly and with the teardrops glistening within her eyelids, eagerly responded to his request. "Better that I should die than that my father should suffer," she answered in loving accents,

and the old father then realized what a noble daughter he had in Almond Blossom.

But the devotion that had touched to its very depths the heart of her old father had produced an impression that was not likely to be forgotten far beyond the vicinity of her own home. The fairies, who are always on the look out for noble deeds amongst the dwellers on earth, heard the loving words of Almond Blossom to her father, in which she expressed her willingness to die in his stead, and they were moved with the profoundest admiration for the sacrifice she was prepared to make for him.

"We know" said one of the leaders in the fairyland, "that the action of this noble woman will be attended with great peril to her life and, unless we are prepared to succour her, she will not be able to survive the machinations of her enemies, and so she will miserably perish. I am going, therefore, to commission one of you to descend to the far-off earth, and attend her wherever she goes, and foil every attempt against her life."

Hardly had he done speaking than one of the brightest fairies that had listened to the story of Almond Blossom, seated on a dew drop through which the colours of the rainbow glistened, was flying through the air with the speed of a sunbeam to the village where our heroine lived.

The time specified by the Snake King for the delivery of his bride had almost elapsed, when on the morning of the tenth day a mean-looking sedan-chair, quite different from the gorgeous bridal ones that custom demands should be used for conveying the bride, drew up at the door of Almond Blossom's home and was set down in front of it. The men that carried it had a most disreputable look about them, but there was something in their manner and bearing that made them seem of even a lower caste than that to which the ordinary chair coolies in China belong. They said they had been sent by their master to bring the fourth daughter of the family to his home, and they would be glad if matters could be hurried up as they had a considerable way to travel, and they were anxious to get back as quickly as possible.

The sight of the mean-looking bridal chair, and of the decidedly inferior character of the coolies that were to carry her, gave Almond Blossom a feeling of alarm which she found it difficult to suppress, but not for one single moment did she dream of endeavouring to escape from the sacrifice that she believed lay before her. Dressing herself in the best of the dresses that she possessed, she came to bid a final adieu to her beloved father, when, with a heart full of sorrow, he asked her how he could discover where she lived, so that at the proper time he might come and visit her in her new home. "My heart goes with you," he said, "and ere long I shall want to come and see how you are getting on. I shall have no peace of mind indeed until I can assure myself that you are happy, and that your husband loves you and is trying to make your life a joyous and contented one."

His daughter, who was sincerely and devotedly attached to him, replied that she would be just as anxious to see him again as he was to see her, and that she would take with her in her chair a good supply of hemp seed and small beans that she would drop every now and again along the road they travelled, and by the aid of these he would be able to trace her to her new home.

Saying this she stepped into the chair that had come for her and, suppressing her feelings and hiding the emotion that filled her heart so long as her father was looking upon her, was swiftly borne away by her mysterious bearers, who really belonged to the race of snakes. In a turning of the road she was soon lost sight of by her disconsolate father.

After the proper time allowed by etiquette, the old father, who had perpetually thought about his daughter and wondered as to her fate, set out with a heart full of doubt and anxiety to visit her. After proceeding a few yards from his home, with his eyes fixed on the ground, he suddenly to his great joy discovered the seeds that his beloved daughter had dropped, in order to guide him in his search of her. There was no break in the line of these loving mementoes of one who, whilst believing she was going to her destruction, could still think with such tender care of the one for whom she was giving her life.

After many a mile had been travelled, the trail suddenly diverged from the main road and led through a beautiful country, diversified with trees and running streams and wild flowers. Gradually it began to take the aspect of a park that had been laid out in connection with some nobleman's mansion, for rare and valuable trees were seen growing, and flowers full of perfume filled the air with their fragrance. The whole seemed more like some fairy scene that had been transferred from fairyland than any earthly one that his eyes had ever rested upon.

The old man began to doubt whether he was not trespassing on some great man's property, and he would have retreated had not his eye caught sight of the beans that his daughter had dropped to guide him to her. At length, after winding his way for some time amongst the most lovely gardens, he found himself in the presence of a most extensive range of buildings, that evidently belonged to some man who was immensely wealthy.

The old father was perplexed. This surely could not be the house of his daughter, who had left him in such a mean conveyance as her husband had sent to bring her home. He was once more feeling uneasy and thinking he ought to retrace his steps when his eye just then caught the tiny symbols of his daughter's affection lying plentifully on the ground, as though to dispel any doubts that might exist in his mind about this being the right place.

All hesitation now vanished from his mind, and, advancing to the main entrance, he inquired of a servant who seemed to be in charge of the door if his mistress was in. Gazing steadily at the poor common-looking old man, as though in doubt as to whether he should not drive him off the premises, he asked him, with a patronizing air, what it mattered to him whether his mistress was in or not. Just at that moment, and before he could answer the question that had been put to him, his daughter, who was passing through one of the spacious courtyards, caught sight of him and rushed towards him with her face beaming with smiles.

Seizing hold of his hand she led him into an inner apartment, all the while testifying to her extreme delight in

once more seeing him, and in having him with her. Here she described what had happened to her on the eventful day when she bade him good-by as she then thought forever. All her fears had been falsified the moment she saw her husband, for he had received her with the most loving and tender courtesy and by his subsequent devotion to her he had completely won her heart. "I am only sorry," she continued, "that you will not be able to meet him on this visit, for he has gone on a long journey that will prevent him from getting back for several weeks."

"But you must come and see my house," she said, and wandering from room to room of this spacious mansion, the old father's eyes opened in astonishment at the magnificent things with which they were all adorned. There was a lavishness in the way each one had been furnished that would seem more befitting an emperor's palace than the home of a commoner. The old man had never seen such splendid things before and was lost in wonder as the glories of each room burst upon his astonished gaze. Amidst all his delight, however, there was one thing that gave him unbounded satisfaction, and that was that the beloved daughter who had been prepared to sacrifice her life for him was happy, and that her filial devotion had been rewarded by heaven with such a home as she now possessed.

After spending a few days with Almond Blossom, he returned to his home, laden with the most costly presents of silks and satins that his daughter had pressed upon him. The astonishment of his daughters was very great when their father rehearsed to them all the glories of the palace in which he declared their youngest sister was now living, and envy, cruel and bitter, entered into the heart of the eldest sister when she remembered that all that had been offered to her but had been rejected. For the moment she comforted herself with the fiction that her father was exaggerating the glories of her sister's home, and that it was not nearly so grand as he had represented it to be. She would, however, test the matter for herself, and pay a visit to this palatial mansion, and see whether it was really as magnificent as he had described it to them.

Burning with impatience, and jealous that her sister, on whom she had always looked with a kind of contempt because of her want of spirit, should be the mistress of an establishment so regal and so magnificent as that described by her father, the very next day she started to verify with her own eyes the marvellous stories that she had been told of Blossom's home. As she drew near to the house she began to feel a kind of awe creeping over her, for the accounts given by her father of her sister's residence were far from giving an adequate picture of its grandeur and magnificence. She was a woman of determination, however, and she was not going to allow the purpose she had already formed in her mind to be thwarted by any craven fears that might come over her.

Coming up boldly to the great entrance, she demanded of the men in charge that she should be taken to her sister, whom she said she had come to visit. This statement brought forth a most ready obedience and in a moment or two she found herself in the presence of Blossom. The latter, with her charming disposition and absolutely unsuspicious nature, received her with the greatest demonstrations of joy and affection. She made her sit down and tell how she had been, and all the family news, whilst her eyes glistened with delight as she heard about what was going on in her old home.

After some time the elder sister suggested that she would like very much to be shown over the house, of which she had received such a graphic description, she said, from her father, and of the wonderful things it contained. She was longing, she declared, to see them for herself, and to be gratified by their marvels. After wandering about among the spacious halls that were adorned by exquisite scrolls that the most famous artists of China and of snake land had painted, and through the numerous rooms that abounded in this great mansion, they came out into a large courtyard around which some of them had been built. Here were collected specimens of the rarest flowers, some of them so fragrant that they filled the air with their perfume.

In the centre of this extensive court was a large well, which Blossom explained had been dug more than a hundred years ago and which was looked upon with a great deal of superstition by the people around. It was believed that spirits had their abode within its depths, for sounds that did not seem earthly were being made day and night within its dark recesses that could only be the result of either fairies or gnomes that had their dwelling down there. The water was never used, she continued, for men were afraid of disturbing the mysterious beings whose inarticulate sounds could be constantly heard from above.

Whilst Blossom was telling her story with an innocent face and with a heart full of faith in the reality of the invisible beings that she believed had possession of the well, her sister's mind was rapidly working out the plan by which she might dispose of her, and establish herself as her successor in this magnificent home. Suddenly the opportunity came, for whilst Blossom was bending over the well and peering into the depths below, her sister gave her a violent push that precipitated her into it, and with a cry of despair she vanished out of sight into the hidden abyss below.

Everything had favoured this murderous act. Not a soul was around to witness it. The servants were far away in another part of the building, and they two were the only ones that were in this large wing of the house. There was no possibility of discovery and what was needed now was a bold front and an assumption of perfect innocence and there was no reason why anyone should ever know of the terrible crime that had been committed that day. She little dreamed of the invisible forces that were already at work to avenge the wrong that she had committed, or how the fairy that had been specially sent down from the Western Heaven had already rescued Blossom from a violent death, and had her in safe keeping until she could restore her to her husband, when in due time he returned from his visit to the kingdom of the snakes.

After resting for a considerable time, she called one of the servants and asked him if she knew where his mistress was. "I left her some time ago," she explained, "and she

was to follow me immediately; will you please call her and tell her I would be glad to see her."

The man went slowly away, but by and by he returned with a most anxious look on his face and declared that he could not find a trace of her. Search was then made by all the servants in the house, until every room and corner in the building had been examined, but no sign could be seen of her anywhere.

Great was the excitement throughout the whole of the establishment, for Blossom had been beloved by every member in it, both high and low. Messengers were at once dispatched to the neighbouring villages and along the high road to make inquiries as to whether anyone had seen her, but after hours of anxious searching they returned without any light being thrown upon the mysterious disappearance of their beloved mistress.

On the morrow a strange but beautiful-looking bird flew out of the well, down which Blossom had been hurled, and alighting upon a branch of a tree that grew in the courtyard, began to sing in a most melodious but mournful manner. As the sister sat and listened to the melody, she was startled to find that mingled with the bird-like notes of the songster there was something exceedingly human about them. As she listened she discovered to her horror that the bird was singing the story of the crime she had committed, and that if any of the servants had been about they would have found out how it was that Blossom had disappeared. Mad with fear she made a sudden rush upon the singer and seizing it she twisted its neck and threw it outside the house. Marvellous to say, the next morning, when she glanced at the spot where she had thrown the bird, she found that a clump of most beautiful bamboos had grown up on the very spot where it had been cast.

Whilst she was looking with wonder upon the graceful trees as they bent before the morning breeze, her heart almost stood still when she found that the sounds that came from the agitated bamboos were articulate, and in low and plaintive language they were rehearsing minutely the scene at the well, when Blossom had been violently pushed into it.

Seizing an axe she speedily cut down the tell-tale bamboos, hoping that now the story of her crime would be for ever forgotten, but she soon found to her sorrow that wickedness is not so easily covered up, and that heaven has ways that men never dream of by which it reveals the secrets of those who have committed wrong. Besides, the fairy who had Blossom in hiding was still planning for her restoration to her home and for the condign punishment of her unnatural sister.

Some of the servants gathering up the bamboos that had been cut down were so struck by the peculiar shape and colouring of them that they did not dare to burn them as they would have done the ordinary common specimens.

They were so beautiful that they thought them worthy of preservation, for they were of a kind that had never been seen before in that region. The stem instead of being round was square,* whilst the colour was not the usual pale yellow, but was jet black. With the utilitarian ideas of the Chinese, they determined that they should not be wasted, so calling in an itinerant worker in bamboo they commissioned him to make them into chairs that they might present them to their master when he returned from his journey. This he did the very day on which they were finished.

His first inquiry when he entered his home was for his wife. The servants had only the sorrowful tale to tell that on a certain day she had mysteriously disappeared and though they had searched the whole country round not a single trace of her could be found.

The sister coming in at the moment, with every appearance of distress on her countenance, corroborated their statements and described how she had left Blossom for a moment to go into the next room, and how from that time to the present she had vanished so completely that they could never discover what had become of her.

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* A bamboo very similar in character to the kind that had grown so mysteriously in the course of a single night is to be found at the present day in the neighbourhood of Wenchow that lies to the east of Foochow. It is used for making ornamental tables and chairs and is greatly prized for its rarity and for its beauty of shape and colour.

And now a most remarkable miracle was performed. Whilst they were all standing round listening to the story of the last speaker, and a profound gloom rested upon the face of the master, suddenly one of the chairs underwent a wonderful transformation, for it seemed to dissolve before their very eyes and from it arose the figure of Blossom. She told the story of how her sister had attempted to destroy her, and how a good fairy had rescued her from drowning and had kept her in safety until the return of her husband, when she need no longer fear the plots that might be made against her life. The King of the Snakes was so enraged at the wickedness of the sister that he had her executed. No one seemed to regret her death; indeed, when the tale was told it seemed to every one who heard it, that it was a just retribution for the cruel design she had conceived and carried out for the murder of Blossom.

XX.

HOW AN EXPECTANT PRIME MINISTER WAS CURED OF HIS AMBITION BY THE INGENIOUS DEVICE OF A FAIRY.

In a certain city that lay not many miles away from the capital of this great empire of China, there lived a young man into whose heart there had come the wildest spirit of ambition. The thought of rising to the highest honours that the State could confer influenced him in all his waking moments and even tinged his dreams with romantic visions that but added to the great passion of his life.

He was a man of more than ordinary ability and he was vain enough to believe that there was no position that the gods could give him that he was not competent to fill. In many respects he was of a lovable, generous nature, and could he but have been delivered from this unhappy disposition that overshadowed the many excellent qualities that he really possessed he would have made a very useful member of society.

The fairies, who take such an interest in the affairs of mankind, seemed distressed that such a promising young fellow should have his prospects blighted by an infirmity that in the end would ruin his life, and determined to interfere to save him, so one of their number was deputed to fly with all speed from the Western Heaven down to earth to rescue him from the sorrow that they knew would inevitably come upon him.

One day, Chan, with a number of youthful companions, was rambling on the outskirts of the town, when they came to a monastery, embowered amidst huge boulders and shadowed by great pine trees that had been planted a century ago. Some one suddenly remarked that just now there was

a famous physiognomist living in it who had wonderful power in discovering men's fortunes from the conformation of their face and from the lines that nature with some subtle intention had carved upon them.

Chan no sooner heard this than, impelled by a desire to know what fate had in store for him in the future, he rushed off in search of this fortune-teller, who, he hoped, might possibly be able to tell him how his life was going to turn out.

He found him sitting in one of the courtyards under an umbrella-shaped awning to keep the sun from shining on him, with pictures of various kinds of faces that he had grouped around to illustrate his theories and to impress the imagination of those who came to consult him.

After looking long and steadily at Chan, as though he would read into his very soul, he said, as he leisurely fanned himself with his broad palm-leaf fan, "You are one of the favourites of fortune. I see good luck stamped upon every feature of your face just as though heaven had written your destiny on every line in it. The days are not far distant when you will become the greatest mandarin in the State, and when the emperor will shower upon you honours that will make you immensely wealthy and cause your name to be a household word in the home of every scholar in the land."

Chan, overjoyed with the words of the physiognomist, broke out into expressions of delight. "Is it true, indeed," he asked, "that I shall be a mandarin of such a high degree that all these honours and emoluments that you predict for me will ever really come into my life?" "You may rest assured," the fortune-teller answered, "that every word that I have uttered shall be fulfilled in ampler measure than I have language to express. I can plainly see by signs that are to me most certain and infallible that you will become Prime Minister and for twenty years of continued peace you will be the highest subject in the State."

Just at this moment a heavy shower of rain began to fall, and Chan, having gladly paid a generous fee to the fortune-teller, fled with all haste into a room that was occupied by one of the priests connected with the monastery.

Here seated on a hassock, he saw a venerable-looking bonze who was so absorbed in meditation that the entrance of Chan made no impression upon him. His appearance was a very striking one, and was very different from that of the ordinary, illiterate, coarse-looking priests that are usually found in the temples and monasteries throughout the country.

He had the refined and delicate look of the true recluse, who, dissatisfied with life, had dedicated himself to the service of the gods in the hope that by contemplation and by a long course of self-denial he might finally have the happiness of being absorbed into Nirvana, where neither joy nor sorrow would ever disturb the infinite rest of the soul.

Chan looked at him and would have been glad to have conversed with him, for so elated was he with the brilliant prospects that had been promised him by the fortune-teller that he felt as if he could not contain the good news within his own breast. No sign, however, came from the man that he was conscious of his presence, so absorbed was he in the thoughts and visions of a world that only the eye of the seer can ever hope to behold. Little did he dream that this was a fairy that had travelled from the far-off fairyland to work out his deliverance and that even at that very moment when he seemed so oblivious of his presence, he was thinking out the mode by which the purpose for which he had come to earth could be best accomplished.

Chan sat down somewhat impatiently to wait for the passing away of the rain, when almost immediately a fit of drowsiness that he seemed to have no power to control gradually crept over him. He tried to resist this, but without success, and seeing a couch near by he stretched himself out upon it, and in an instant he was sound asleep.

And then began a series of visions so wonderful and so amazing that his heart was filled with the intensest delight. Whilst he was pondering in his mind what all this meant, he suddenly saw two men in official robes drawing near to him, whom he at once recognized as messengers from the emperor. They presented him with a document which they told him was a royal edict, commanding his immediate attendance at palace, as his presence was required there to

discuss certain affairs of State of great importance that His Majesty was unwilling to have transacted before he had consulted him upon them.

Chan was delighted. The predictions of the fortune-teller were evidently coming true faster than ever he had dared to dream they would. With hasty footsteps he followed the imperial messengers, and finally he was ushered into the presence of the Son of Heaven by the high officials, with the most profound reverence and respect.

His fears as to how he would be received were soon driven from his heart when he had been ushered with all the quaint and dignified ceremony of an Eastern Court into the presence of the emperor, especially when, with unaffected simplicity, he had caused him to sit by his side and had treated him as though he had been one of the high mandarins with whom he was daily wont to converse on the great affairs of the kingdom.

After they had been discussing these for a considerable time His Majesty, turning to Chan, said, "I have come to the conclusion that you are the most suitable man that I could find to become my Prime Minister, and I accordingly appoint you to that office from this very moment. I am so satisfied with your ability to undertake the responsible duties connected with this important position that I shall at once issue an edict to that effect, so that there may be no unnecessary delay in your attending the great Council meetings that are held every morning before the dawn has come upon the world. In order to show you the confidence that I have in your honour and discretion, of the nine grades of officials that are employed in ruling the people of my empire, with the exception of the three highest, I shall hand over to you to appoint and dispose of as may seem best to you. I know I can do this with safety, for your wisdom and your purity of character are sufficient guarantees to me that in conferring such large and unusual power upon you I shall but be benefiting the State. And now as you are leaving let me bestow upon you as a token of my esteem a parting gift. The value is not great, but it will remind you of our meeting to-day and of the new tie that binds you and me for

years to come, I hope. It is a horse of rare beauty that has been sent me from the far West, and when men see you riding on it they will recognize it as one that I have often used myself, and so will all the more be inclined to pay you honour."

Chan returned home amazed and delighted, and with his brain full of visions of what the coming years would bring him. He was still young, but with one great bound he had landed on the highest pinnacle of glory, and now everything that heart could wish to possess lay within his grasp.

When he reached his home his mind became perplexed at the mysterious change that had come over it. The old home where he and his fathers had lived was now radiant with the newest and the brightest colours that the most skilled painters could lay upon it. They were all of a regal tone and such as well befitted the mansion of a high Minister of State.

It was, however, when he had entered inside that his mind was struck with wonder at the strange transformation that had been effected upon everything that he saw. It seemed, indeed, as though the rarest treasures of the kingdom had been sought out, and with fairy hands had been transported to it, and had been placed with such deft and cunning hand that their glories shone out with the most conspicuous result. There were ebony chairs and tables from Canton, but of so rare and delicate carving, and with such quaint and difficult designs, that only the master artists of the nation could ever have executed them. There were scrolls, too, that adorned the walls, made of various coloured silks that had been woven in the looms of Soochow and Hangchow, of such delicate hues and tints that the eye rested upon them with the most exquisite pleasure. Scattered too, about the rooms, with apparent carelessness, as though they were of but little value, were vases and dishes from the potteries in Kiangsi, with the famous hall-marks and the exquisite colours that made each of them almost worth a king's ransom.

All this was very astonishing to Chan, but there were further surprises still in store, far greater than any that had yet happened to him. Calling for one of his servants, he was

thunderstruck by half a dozen men, dressed in long robes and with an official air as though they might have been small mandarins, hurrying in, and in a submissive tone of voice, begging to know what service was required of them.

Hardly had he pulled himself together and remembered that he was no longer the commoner Chan, but the Prime Minister of China, when a commotion was heard in the outer courtyard and the voices of coolies filled the air with their noisy clamour. Asking one of these stately servants, that he felt almost afraid to address, so grand did he seem to him, what was the meaning of this he was informed with a profound obeisance that they were porters that were bringing presents to him from a powerful mandarin in the city, who in this substantial manner wished to congratulate him on the honours that had been conferred upon him by His Majesty.

His old life he soon found had been completely displaced by the larger one, that never even in his moments of highest ambition had flashed upon his imagination. When he went out on any public business it seemed indeed that the eyes of all the world were upon him to pay him reverence. The common people bowed low their heads as he rode by, and fled with haste to the road-sides, whilst the centre of the street was left deserted for him and his retinue.

Even the mandarins of lower grade manifested the utmost obsequiousness when they accidentally met him by the way. Some bowed almost to the ground, others knelt on the roadway, whilst some again who hoped to obtain preferment took off their shoes, unworthy they would have him think to stand in any other guise before him.

The years went by and Chan's power grew and strengthened with the lapse of time. His intellect was naturally powerful and the science of statesmanship was one that had a special attraction for him, and so it came to pass that the conduct of imperial matters fell into his hands. Unfortunately his avarice grew apace with the extension of his influence. The privilege of disposing of offices throughout the empire which the emperor had bestowed upon him when he made him Prime Minister had exercised a most baneful effect upon him.

The piling up of wealth became at last the one ambition of his soul. Anyone or anything that stood in his way in regard to this one dominant feature in his life was swept relentlessly from his path. If some noble had possessions that he may have held, whilst some doubtful point of law existed with regard to his title, he was soon robbed by Chan of everything he had. And woe be to the man that dared to stand up for his rights, for as the judges were afraid to offend so great a man by doing justice, he and his whole family were condemned to death as traitors to their country.

At last his exactions and his tyranny became so intolerable that a movement was made to impeach him before the emperor. A mandarin in high official position accordingly drew up a list of the offences of which he was guilty and presented them.

In this petition it was shown that he had latterly neglected the affairs of the kingdom, he was utterly reckless in the amassing of money, and he had caused large numbers of people to be put to death without any sufficient reason, but simply because they had been obnoxious to him for some reason or other. For all the crimes he had committed both against the kingdom and against the lives and property of His Majesty's subjects, the emperor was besought to deprive him of all his offices and have him put to death.

Chan was in mortal terror when this petition was presented to the Cabinet Council over which the Son of Heaven presided, and when the long list of his crimes was duly read before the members that composed it. Fortunately for him the emperor happened to be in an easy mood at the time, and he rather made light of the charges that were brought against him, fancying for the moment that they were a plot got up by some enemy of the Prime Minister to get him ousted from his position in order that he might step into his place.

The failure of this attempt to bring Chan to justice caused widespread alarm and consternation amongst the nobles and high mandarins in the capital, for they feared the vengeance he might exact upon all whom he might suspect of being privy to this attempt to cause his overthrow. They

accordingly combined their forces, and as a united body they drew up an indictment even stronger and more forcible than the former one, and giving ample and convincing proof that all the crimes laid to his charge were absolutely true.

This time the king became convinced that the matter was more serious than he had formerly deemed possible. The character of the men and the number of those who had signed the accusation were a sufficient guarantee that the charges brought against the Prime Minister must have some foundation in fact. After a careful examination of these, he came to the conclusion that Chan was guilty, and he accordingly issued an edict depriving him of his office and banishing him to the province of Yünnan, whilst at the same time the whole of his property was confiscated to the State.

Immediately following upon the issue of this decree, a whole regiment of soldiers was dispatched to the home of the disgraced minister, and took possession of everything it contained. There were found to be millions worth of property in it, for the jewellery and precious jade stones that had been accumulating for many years were in themselves enough to make the man that owned them a millionaire.

No pity was shown to the man that but yesterday was the most powerful subject in the empire. He and his wife and his sons and daughters were all seized, bound with ropes and treated with the utmost indignity. As the home was being dismantled and the heaps of precious things were ruthlessly carried off amid the scoffing and laughter of the soldiers, Chan and his family were in the utmost distress. Not a kindly word was said to any one of them, but insults were heaped upon them, and reproaches and maledictions that were even worse to bear than the loss of all the property that had been the cause of all the disasters that had come upon them.

After the house had been cleared of every article that had made one of the most luxurious mansions in the empire, and the doors had been sealed with the imperial seal showing that the building was now the property of the State, the villainous-looking runners that had been deputed to carry out the sentence of banishment to the far-off province of

Yünnan, with rough and brutal hands seized upon the fallen minister. They then fastened a rope about his neck, lest he might attempt to escape, and gathering close around him in order to prevent the possibility of a rescue they dragged him out on the long and weary journey that lay before him before he could reach his destination in the west.

The misery of that moment when he was thus ignominiously driven through the streets of the capital, a miserable criminal, where once his power had been supreme, was the bitterest experience of his life. Those streets that for many years had been witnesses of his glory, when the crowds used to gather to behold the pomp and splendour that he displayed as he rode through them to the palace of the emperor, now saw him degraded and fallen, dragged along by sordid hands, the object of contempt, with no eyes filled with tears at his fate, and no thought of pity amongst those that looked upon this spectacle of fallen greatness.

Mile after mile he was hurried along the road ready to drop through fatigue. He begged and entreated that even the roughest conveyance might be given him, so that he could rest his weary limbs. He pleaded that he had never been accustomed to walk and that unless some little sympathy were shown him he would most certainly perish on the road, and die in their very hands.

He spoke, however, to men whose souls had been so hardened by duties that had tended to obliterate the finest feelings of the heart, that the only impression that his piteous appeal had upon them was to tighten the rope that bound their victim, and to rush on with increased speed along the doleful way.

At length they came to the foot of a pass that led over a high range of hills, and, as Chan looked up and saw the narrow pathways winding up higher and higher away up amongst the mountains, his heart sank within him. "It is quite impossible," he said, "that I can climb those steep and rugged heights, for my strength is almost exhausted. Have pity on me, and let us rest here for the night and to-morrow, after I have been refreshed with sleep, we may then continue our journey with some hope that I may be able to scale the

many ranges of hills that lie between us and the plains beyond."

The only reply to this most sad and touching speech was a violent dash forward to mount the stone stairway. Every step that Chan took caused him unutterable pain and weariness, so utterly exhausted had he become by the cruel strain that had been put upon him since he left his home. The thought too of his wife and children, left to the tender mercies of the world, and of his own wrecked fortunes, added bitterness to the forlorn condition in which he found himself, and his heart was like to break with the accumulated sorrows that in one unhappy day had fallen upon him and his house.

The day was drawing to a close when the highest ridge of this lofty pass could be dimly seen in the distance. The shadows had already fallen deep and heavy on the valleys below, and the fading light of day was getting blurred and misty on the higher points on which the setting sun was shedding his parting gift to the world.

Just at this moment the party entered a pine grove and, in the involved and winding paths that were rendered indistinct by the gloom shed upon them by the trees, they found it difficult to advance. They had not only to pick their way among the stones that formed the ancient roadway, that the feet of countless travellers had worn smooth and which the storms of rain had torn from their places, but they had also to see that their prisoner did not escape them during the growing darkness that was falling upon them.

They were just emerging out of the gloom of this miniature forest, and were congratulating themselves that they would soon reach the rest house that had been built for the use of travellers on the crest of the pass, when the confused noise of many voices was heard in front of them. Everyone stopped in alarm, for the sounds were not those of peaceful travellers, but of the robbers that were known to infest these hills. By and by a band of men could be seen flying wildly towards them, each of whom had a sword in his hand which he brandished in the air, at the same time uttering the most savage imprecations and threats of murder.

"Robbers!" the runners cried, and in an instant everyone had fled in the utmost terror, leaving Chan standing on the road, a solitary figure to meet the excited thieves that were rushing upon him.

When they came up to him, he fell upon his knees and besought for mercy. "Have pity upon me," he cried, "and spare my life. I have nothing in the world to give you, for the riches that I once possessed have all been taken from me, and now I own only the clothes in which you see me dressed."

"We want nothing from you but your life," one that seemed to be a leader shouted in a loud excited voice. "Do you know who we are?" he asked in a threatening voice. "We are not robbers as you suppose. Look well at us. Can you not recognize us? We are the spirits of the men that you plundered and hounded to death when you were Prime Minister, and we are here now to avenge the wrongs that brought destruction upon us and our homes, and therefore you must die." With that a dozen swords gleamed in the air and in a moment were sheathed in his body, and the unfortunate minister was left dead upon the road.

The avenging spirits now seized upon the soul of the murdered man, and, flying with a speed that far surpassed the lightning's flash, they soon arrived at the palace of Yen-lo, the dread ruler of the Land of Shadows. Here the keepers of the doors led them into the presence of the king, who was then engaged in deciding the cases of a number of wretched-looking spirits that stood trembling before him. When it came to Chan's turn to be tried, the stern ruler called for the book in which the actions of men were recorded. Turning over page after page he at last came to the chapter on which the life of Chan was minutely detailed.

No sooner had he read a few lines of that, than he seemed convulsed with anger. "This man," he said, "has always acted as a traitor to his king and his country, and is therefore deserving of the severest punishment that I can mete out to him. Here, Lictors!" he cried, "carry him away at once and let him stew for half-an-hour in the great oil cauldron."

In an instant a dozen attendant spirits had seized upon Chan and had dragged him along in the direction of where smoke was rising in thick volumes from what seemed to be a blazing furnace. When he came closer to it, he saw that fires were raging underneath and all around a huge cauldron filled with oil that was kept continually on the boil by the constant supply of fuel that dark, forbidding-looking spirits kept heaping on the fires below.

When Chan saw this his mind was filled with such terror that he cried out in perfect agony, and putting forth all his strength he endeavoured to loosen the grip that the spirits had upon him and to make his escape, but all in vain. Before he knew where he was he had been pitched headlong into the boiling oil and was suffering such tortures as he had never deemed it possible that any human being could endure and yet live. His cries now were pitiable in the extreme. He wanted to die he said. The oil got down his throat, and into his very bones so that he seemed to be on fire, and he cried for mercy, but compassion was a thing that had long died out of the hearts of those who were carrying out the orders of the dread Yen-lo. After a time Chan was forked out of the boiling oil, by long prongs that stuck into his flesh, and once more he was hurried with indecent haste before the judgment seat.

"I see by the books," the great judge thundered out, "that you were the cause of the death of many of the inhabitants of the Celestial Empire; that you were never known to spare an enemy, and that men called upon you for mercy, but you always turned a deaf ear to them. I adjudge, therefore, that you be carried away and that you be impaled upon the knives that stand ready for such criminals as you are on the Knife Mountain."

Once more Chan felt himself caught up with incredible swiftness and in what seemed but a few seconds he saw the Knife Mountain looming up above him. It was one mass of knives, that were stuck in at all possible angles, so that whoever fell upon them could not escape the deadly thrust that these cruel instruments of torture were intended to give. Whilst he was gazing at this awful spectacle, that almost

froze his blood and filled his heart with the wildest terror, he felt himself suddenly flung into the air and a moment after he fell upon the cruel knives.

The agony he had to endure seemed even more intense than what he had suffered from the boiling oil. Again he wanted to die but could not. He dared not move, he scarcely dared to breathe. Happily he was soon relieved from this and once more he was flying through the air in the grip of the evil spirits and placed in front of Yen-lo.

"I find," this latter said, "that when you were Prime Minister you sold the offices of the Crown and that you made an enormous fortune out of these sales, though you knew they were illegal and hurtful to the purity of justice and to the welfare of the kingdom." "Take the counting board," he said, to a man with a bushy beard that stood by, "and reckon up the full amount that this man received during the years in which he held the highest office in the State."

In a few seconds this grim accountant had added up the various sums that had been received by Chan, when they were found to amount to three hundred and twenty million taels. "I adjudge," say the grim ruler with the suspicion of a twinkle in his eye, "that he shall this instant be made to swallow this vast sum that he so unrighteously accumulated when he was on earth."

Without a moment's delay a band of spirits went out to the Mountain of Gold that loomed up near by and dug up just the amount that Chan had gained. This they melted in a furnance, and laying him on his back, they poured the molten stream down his throat, causing him the most unutterable pains and agonies that the human frame seemed capable of enduring.

Once more the wretched, tortured Prime Minister stood in the presence of the judge. The final sentence came sharp and crisp from his lips. "The prisoner," he said, "shall now return to earth, and there in the new life that I have assigned to him, he shall work out the punishment that I have already meted out to him in this Land of Shadows. His crimes have been too great to be lightly forgiven, and even in the new birth a nemesis must follow him. He shall be born a

woman of such low and humble rank, that, unless some germ of virtue enters his heart and so uplifts him, he shall learn the bitterness of poverty that shall crowd his life with sorrow and despair."

Scarcely were these words uttered when the figure of Yen-lo began to grow shadowy and the forms of his tormentors became attenuated, whilst the scenes, where he had suffered such excruciating torments, lost their identity in a hazy mist, and everything vanished from his sight. His first stage of suffering had passed away, and now as a woman he was to go on in the expiation of his crimes, until by a life of self-sacrifice he could show that he had repented and had proved himself worthy of being again placed in the higher ranks of society.

When Chan was old enough to realize that he was reincarnated, he found himself or rather herself, for he was now a girl, in an exceedingly poor home that was so scantily furnished that the whole of the furniture consisted of not more than a half a dozen indispensable articles. She found, too, that her mother was a beggar woman, and in course of time her little daughter was compelled to go with her on her begging expeditions.

This wretched kind of existence lasted till she was sixteen, when her mother sold her to a man in a respectable position of life as a concubine. Here her fortunes began to mend. She was no longer the squalid beggar, clothed in rags, and living on the miserable doles of the charitable. Her life now seemed secure against all want, for she was well dressed and had abundance of good food. There was an additional reason too why her heart began to rejoice and that was the love of her husband. Although by no means pretty, there was something in her manner and her native ability that made her most attractive to him, and so on every occasion he treated her with the greatest kindness and love.

The one drawback to all this new enjoyment upon which she had entered was the hatred of the wife. She was intensely jealous of her and adopted every means in her power to make her life miserable. The tenderness, however, with which her husband treated her, and the comforts that

had come to her since she had been able to abandon the beggar's rôle enabled her to bear with tolerable patience the ill-treatment of her rival.

A new and beautiful life had dawned upon her, and it seemed that now at last her sorrows and troubles were gone forever, and only sunshine would flash upon her path in the years that were before her. The decrees of fate, however, were not so easily to be evaded. The grim judge of the Land of Shadows had foretold that infinite sorrows would be her lot, until the crimes of her previous existence had been expiated. Ere many months had passed she was to find how fatally true was this prediction.

One evening she was sitting with her husband and quietly chatting with him, when the door was suddenly burst open and two men entered with long knives in their hands. Rushing furiously at her husband, the men attacked him with these deadly weapons and in a few seconds he was lying dead upon the floor. The robbers, gathering up what valuables they could hastily collect, fled from the room and the poor woman who had been too terrified to utter a sound before, now with loud outcries called for assistance from the rest of the family.

The first to arrive was the unfortunate man's wife, who at once accused the concubine of being the cause of his death. She was in league with confederates outside, she declared, and together they had planned this daring act of murder and robbery. Word was at once sent to the nearest mandarin who ordered his soldiers to apprehend the poor young woman.

The judicial investigations that followed seemed to prove her guilt and she was finally condemned to death. When she heard this decision she was so over-mastered with the sense of injustice that had been done her that she shrieked with horror. And in a moment the girl had vanished from the stage and, lo and behold, it was discovered that it was Chan that had made the outcry that had filled the room with notes of horror.

His companions gathered round him, anxious to know what had caused the awful shriek that had been wrung from him. "What is the matter?" they asked him. "You must

have had a terribly bad dream to make you cry ou. in the way you have just done. What a fright you have given us. You must have thought someone was murdering you to get up such a yell as just now exploded from you. What has happened to you?"

Dazed and confused with the memory of the awful scenes that he had just been passing through, Chan for some time could give no reply to the eager questions that were pressed upon him by his comrades. Looking round he caught the look of the priest that was fastened upon him. It was full of sympathy and his eyes glistened with pleasure as he asked Chan if he still wished to be a Prime Minister.

A sudden terror fell upon the newly-awakened sleeper, and a dim conviction seemed to creep over him that in some way or other he had conjured up the visions that had been passing with such realistic power before him whilst in the land of dreams.

"No," he replied, "I never shall dream again of holding so high an office in the State. The perils, as you have shown me, are too great and the responsibilities too heavy for any common man like me to dare to incur them. But tell me I pray you, how I should spend my life so that I may get the greatest good out of it?"

The priest, with a beaming countenance, replied, "If you really desire to make the most of life you must spend it in the practice of virtue. The meaner thoughts and ambitions by which most men are swayed always end fatally for those who are controlled by them. But when I speak of virtue, never forget the chiefest of them all is the one that the ancient sage has put at the head of the five ideals that he has declared shall remain as long as human life exists, and that is kindness to one's fellowmen. No virtue can be carried out and no supreme happiness can come to any man unless the love of men is deeply rooted within his very soul."

As the fairy uttered these exquisite words, his form seemed gradually to dissolve in mist, and Chan looked with eager eyes at the spot where, but a moment ago, he had been sitting, but no trace could he see of him. He had completely vanished from sight.

THE END.

Author MacGowan, John
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